

Neighbour

Written by Terry Thomas

Thursday, 01 February 2007 00:00

She could telephone anytime: "It's Geraldine here. Listen, I'm really, really sorry. I know it's early, but there's no water coming out of my taps." And thinking what a bloody fool I was, I'd go over to have a look, only to find she'd turned off the pump. "Did I?" she'd say. She'd look surprised and puzzled all at once. "I'm sure I didn't. I haven't been anywhere near it." Indignant then, as if I'd accused her. As if I would.

Her husband had gone, deserted her - I heard, for a younger woman - and this phoning-at-all-hours didn't begin in earnest until after my wife had left me - for a younger man. Before that, before Ruth left, and just occasionally, Geraldine would call and ask her if she might borrow me for half an hour, to change a wheel on her car or fix a fuse. "I never learned how to work the jack thing," she'd say, "I've always been terrified of electricity." Back then, I was only ever used by arrangement and if I didn't return in half an hour, Ruth would come looking. Ruth could have done all the things I did for Geraldine with her hands tied behind her and a hood over her head.

We were neighbours at Waipapakauri on the Ninety Mile Beach in the Far North of New Zealand, a long way from the nearest town. Aside from a single streetlight, we had no services at all. We drank rainwater collected from the roof; we worried about bird-shit in the guttering and whether or not the septic tank was working. We had to be self-sufficient - she was alone; I was a man. Once she knew my situation, I began getting phone calls every other day.

"She wants your body," Robert said. He laughed. He took her off exactly. It was her voice. "Hello Neil, it's Geraldine here. I'm sorry to bother you, I know you're busy, but I need you to come over and give me a shafting."

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Robert found humour in everything. It even amused him when Ruth left. "I don't know how she put up with you as long as she did," he said, and he roared laughing. He came to see how I was coping. "Where did the furniture go?" We wandered around the house together, our voices resounding off the walls. I explained as best I could that apparently I had never owned the furniture. "You need a bonk," he said. "If only to take your mind off things." He looked out the window and saw Geraldine working in her garden.. "There you go," he said. "She's desperate for it."

But how did he know?

Until then, I had never thought about her in that way; she was the woman who lived next door, that's all. A few years back, on New Year's Eve, her husband, Gregg, invited Ruth and I over for drinks. Among other people, my accountant was there, with his wife. It was a pleasant enough evening but, to be truthful, I hardly remembered Geraldine. Now, with Ruth gone, and both of us alone, I began to see my neighbour in a different light. When she asked me could I help her move a sideboard from one room to another, I found myself watching the way she moved, noting how she was dressed, studying her expression and listening for suggestive inflections in everything she said. But I neither saw nor heard any sign of lust. She seemed intent on the job in hand: moving a dresser, a huge Dutch thing, so heavy I wondered if Gregg's body might be inside it. "Look out for that corner! We wouldn't want to redo the wallpaper would we?"

I did begin to wonder what she might be like in bed; or what I might be like if I were with her.

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Would I, could I, cope? Gregg had seemed such a capable beast, hairy to my smooth. And in spite of the garbage I spouted to Robert about past conquests and lascivious adventures I'd had in my youth - foolishly attempting to compete with the expert - apart from a girlfriend or two I'd fumbled in the back row of the cinema and Sally Patcham, who gave me her version of a blow job in the back seat of the old man's Vanguard, I had never had sex with anyone but Ruth. As a result, when I tried to imagine doing it with Geraldine, I failed to imagine anything. What Robert suggested hung in my mind like velvet curtains waiting to be flung apart.

The truth was, I had no perception of an intimate life with anyone but my wife of twenty-three years. We had a grandchild, a dog and a cat, we owned the house, we were life members of the tramping club, we held hands when we watched a movie on TV and in bed we slept like a pair of spoons.

It came as a shock when she told me she was leaving. It was an amputation without anaesthetic. "I've met someone," she said, and she said it as if there was nothing left to discuss. His name was Alan (if only it had been Alain) ". . . just an ordinary bloke," she said. An ordinary bloke like me? He was an accountant - my accountant for Christ's sake. She said, "I've been sleeping with him every Monday and Thursday afternoon for seven months."

On the day the truck came to collect what Ruth perceived as her half of the furniture, I was bereft. I begged her not to go. I couldn't think what I had done wrong or, more to the point, what I hadn't done right. Certainly, something had been happening between us, or maybe hadn't and should have been. Was there anything I could have done to prevent her going?

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"It had nothing to do with you," Robert told me. He put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed. Robert was trying to save me, I'm certain of that. "These things happen all the time, mate. People..." he shrugged, "they just click. You couldn't have done anything. Not your fault," he said. "For God's sake don't blame yourself."

I listened to Robert. I respected his judgement, his vast experience. Robert had been divorced twice and he still had furniture. I had to put my faith in someone.

"You need to get on with your life," he said. "You've had a good woman all these years and now you need another one. It's not that different to replacing the car. What about her next door?"

I remember laughing at him. Scoffing. He had a peculiar way of raising his eyebrows, separately, one at a time. And, when he'd gone, I found myself watching Geraldine out the window. I saw her hang her washing, saw her stretch up to reach the line, the angle of breast and hip, felt stirrings I hadn't encountered for quite some time.

She telephoned to ask if I had a chainsaw, which I don't. She went on to tell me how her husband took theirs with him when he left. She joked about it. "I'm waiting to hear on the news how a man had an accident and cut off his dick." Laughter bubbled out of her like boiling water and it didn't seem to matter that she was laughing at something she'd said herself. She didn't

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exactly ask me to help but, when I saw her on the garage roof, struggling to cut a branch off a bottlebrush, I opened my window and called out to her to let me do it for her.

"I'm not doing very well, am I?" she said. She had hardly made a mark. "I don't know how I'd manage without you." The tree had begun to spread and was threatening the guttering. It took me half an hour to saw through the branch with a handsaw and drag it away.

"You poor man," she said. "Come on. I've got cold beer waiting for us in the fridge."

She fussed around me, sat me down in her lounge, brought out two bottles of beer and sat across from me. We quickly exhausted the subject of sawing branches off a tree and began to compare our separate situations.

"I had no idea Ruth was sleeping with anyone," I said. "I didn't know it was happening."

"Women are better at hiding things than men," she said. "Women are better liars, and we're

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more perceptive. I mean, Gregg thought I didn't suspect, but I always knew when he'd slept with the bitch by the smug expression he had on his face."

"Monday and Friday afternoons they were at it, and I never once noticed a thing," I said.

"And it wasn't as if she was the first," she said. "I could make a list . . ." she spread her hands and there was that bubbling chuckle again. "The bitch list."

"My accountant, " I said.

"Alan Fraser . . ." she nodded. "He's a friend of Gregg's, or he was." She looked up at the ceiling. "It was Jocelyn Fraser that Gregg went off with - your accountant's wife."

I could hardly believe what she was telling me. Did they meet at that New Year's party? And where was I? I drank what was left of my beer and put the bottle down. "I only had half the story."

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"It's not quite a circle yet though is it?" She smiled suggestively, for the first time. "But you're not over it yet, are you?" She came across and put her hands on my knees. "I'm sorry. I thought you knew all this."

She leaned closer and I became aware of a scent that was no less sweet and stronger somehow than Ruth's. I pulled out a handkerchief and wiped my eyes. Her hands gripped my knees. "You must think I'm an idiot," I said. I blew my nose.

"I think we need something stronger," she said. She picked up the empty beer bottles and took them back the kitchen. She called out, "How does Jim Beam and Coca Cola sound?" She returned with bottles and glasses. "Let's concentrate on us," she said. She fetched ice and poured us both a drink.

"Here's to us," I said.

We touched glasses and emptied them. When the liquor joined the beer already in my stomach,

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the heat from the reaction rushed directly to my head.

"You look better now," she said. She poured us both another and we leaned back in our chairs, smiling at each other. "Here's to the survivors," she said.

We drank the entire contents of the bottle. I remember us throwing peanuts into each other's mouths. We told silly jokes that, another time, wouldn't have made us smile, and she almost choked once and needed a thump on the back. We got drunk and I knew we would end up in bed together. I remember how the prospect excited me.

She went to the kitchen for more beer and returned wearing a silk kimono with a dragon climbing up her back. "I know it's a little cliché," she said, waving the hem of the robe. "But what shall we drink to now?"

I was having trouble focussing. "Here's to closing the circle," I said.

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"I'd forgotten all about them," she said. She brought her bottle to touch against mine and fell across me. The weight and warmth of her dropped into my lap and, when I attempted to break her fall, my arms went around her and one of her breasts was cupped in my hand. "Whoops," she said. She giggled. She reached up, pulled my head down and kissed me. Her tongue moved into my mouth and I moved my hand on her breast. She made a sound, deep in her throat and suddenly she was naked.

"You got me drunk," she said. She giggled. "And now you're taking advantage." She stood up and pulled me up with her. She giggled again. She put her arms around my neck and we kissed as if we did it every day. I felt the length of her pressing against me, her thighs against mine. I heard the rushing of my blood. My hands slid down the steps of her spine and out onto the swell of her hips. Then something intangible happened. Something unimaginable. In my mind, and just for an instant, I was saying goodbye to Ruth - and I gagged.

"It's not anything to worry about," Robert said.

"I went over to cut a branch off her tree and ended up making a prick of myself."

"You're taking it too seriously. It's just a bit of fun, mate. A place to put it on a Saturday night. Y'know what I mean?"

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As it happened I didn't. But I nodded my agreement because Robert was my friend.

"Forget Ruth. She's getting her share and you're not getting any. What's happening with Geraldine now?"

"Nothing. She hasn't called me since. I rang her once and she hung up on me."

Robert laughed. "It looks bad but maybe there is some hope for you."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, first you have to decide if you want to do anything at all. Are you up for it?"

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"I am." I said.

"Then return the bottle of bourbon. Get a card, spend some money on it. Get some flowers. Take all that over and dump it on her. See what happens. If she chases you away then you'll still have the bourbon." Robert's eyebrows were in top gear. "You wouldn't see me walking away from a chance like that."

I left it a week. I thought I might see her over the fence, a casual encounter. I even thought she might call, wanting help with something - anything. I thought I could take it from there. But I didn't see her and she didn't call. I knew she was at home because windows were opened and closed during the day and lights went on and off at night. She was avoiding me; the next step was clearly mine. In the end, I was left with nothing but Robert's suggestion.

Saturday night, showered and shaved, I went over with bourbon and flowers. I walked to the door of her house with my apology all worked out. The lights were on inside, there was a light on in the bedroom. I could hear music . . . laughter. It had never occurred to me there might be someone with her. There was a man in there. Who could it be? I could sense their intimacy from the tone of their voices, could they be throwing peanuts into each other's mouths? I stood at the door without knocking. I stood there while the music played on and on. I imagined them dancing. I stood at the door with a bunch of flowers and a bottle of Jim Beam bourbon and a fancy card that said *I'm Sorry; Can You Forgive Me?* And I wondered if they were laughing at me. It was dark and it was cold and then it began to rain. I stood at the door and thought how

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old I was and how stupid I must look, standing at her door. I thought about the mess I'd made of everything. I wondered what Ruth was doing, where she was, did she ever think of me when she was screwing Alan Foster? And then I remembered what Robert had said . . . I still had the bourbon. I swung the bottle in a wide arc and when I released it, it crashed through the bedroom window and the laughter stopped.