

Scott Sandler

Neighbors

I guess the most curious thing about him is his eyes. It's the only thing Pam and I don't agree upon. The lids go way down. Past the pupils—like they're half asleep. So, it's hard to see exactly what color they are. I say his eyes are dead like the lids. I think they're a cold brown like two dirty pennies. Pam says I'm wrong. She says if he looks directly at you, they're like flashbulbs. They take your picture. Pam's never seen him late at night but she bet me that they glow in the dark.

The rest of it we both agree on. He sits all day at the bus stop outside the Fotomat but he never catches a bus. He wears an olive green raincoat and occasionally puts up the hood. He never talks. He wears a Swiss watch but he never gives out the time and no one asks him for it.

Pam says maybe he's related to the lady at the Fotomat. She's got droopy lids too. "Maybe it's some hereditary thing," she says, "only he got the worst of it." Pam dares me to ask her and I do.

The lady stops thumbing through the pictures, turns and looks at me like she's insulted. She says she's never seen him

before.

I cup my hand around my mouth and whisper to her, “Aren’t you scared? He’s weird. He talks to himself. He looks down at his watch all the time. I see his lips move. He looks just like he’s waiting for a bomb to go off or something.”

She spits as she talks. “Well, maybe I’m a little scared. I don’t know. I mean, I’m all alone here and who knows what a guy will do when he’s all junked up.”

“How do you know he’s all junked up,” I ask her.

“You can just tell,” she says.

The next day, Pam and I skip Mr. Damell’s Horticulture class and we hang out at the old elementary school. At the school, I tell Pam the lady’s theory and Pam tells me that the lady doesn’t know what she’s talking about. She bites into a peanut-butter-cream cheese-banana sandwich and says, “You don’t really buy that crap, do you?”

“Where do you think he got that watch? You think maybe he traded some junk for it.”

“He’s not a dooper,” she says, rolling the sticky pieces of banana on her tongue. “Maybe the watch is a present or maybe he worked for it, you don’t know.” She sounds mad. Pam pulls out a twinkie from a brown sack, tears open the plastic with her teeth and gives me half. The playground is pretty quiet, except for a bunch of kids behind us playing White Duck, Yellow Duck. A kid with greasy hair walks around the circle—white duck, white duck, yellow duck. He slaps his hand down hard on someone’s head and Pam and I watch them chase each other. No one else seems to notice us. No one seems to know about this guy either, or at least no one else talks about him. I look at Pam and it’s like it’s our secret.

He is wearing his hood, even though the sun is out. A girl in a plaid skirt and dark braids sits at the opposite end of the bench

and is pretending not to notice him. Pam and I sit across the street, looking out the Fatburger window and we see he is counting to himself. We also notice that he is holding in his hand a grape soda. His hands are wrapped tight around the bottle and then he lifts it up and swirls it around like a beaker full of chemicals. He lifts it up higher and for a minute I think he's making a toast. If his lids open up, he can probably see the sun change the purple color into pink. Pam is tapping on the tabletop.

"How do you think he got that soda," I ask Pam. "You think he actually got up from that bench and walked all the way down to the liquor store by himself."

"No, he never leaves that spot," Pam says.

For a moment there is silence, a gap. No one talks. Pam's just chewing and I'm looking at her chew. I'm looking at her hair and how the sun turns it a burnt orange. I'm looking at the peach colored strap that slips off her freckled shoulder. She makes noises as she chews. She looks up at me and I've got nothing to say. I come up with, "Well, maybe we should meet this guy...say hi, or something."

Pam looks up at me and smiles.

It was Pam's idea that we write him a letter and she did the writing because her printing is better. In the letter we ask him questions like what his name is and where he lives. Pam tells me she came up with the idea, so I have to give him the letter. I say I don't want to. She says one of us has to.

"What if he's junked up," I say.

"He's not," she says and hands me the sheet of paper.

The piece of paper is in my hand, folded up four ways. I cross the street. I am hoping that my sweaty palms don't smudge

the ink and then I say to myself, well, maybe it would be better if he can't read it. I edge over to the bench and I see the lady from the Fotomat. Her grey head fills up the space in the window and she's looking at me. This is the closest I've ever been to this guy. His hood is down and I see his matted black hair. I sit down on the bench next to him. I see the initials V.I. stitched with light green thread in his collar. He's looking down at the sidewalk and the dead lids make him look asleep. My heart's beating fast. I ask him for the time and he doesn't answer. He just continues to look down at the sidewalk. I ask him again if he knows the time. He still doesn't say anything, only this time he holds out his arm. I look at the dark band, at the Roman Numerals and then I slip the paper in his outstretched hand. As he looks up, I look down. Now, I'm like him, looking down at the sidewalk.

This is the exact letter he reads:

Dear Sir,

We've noticed you for a long while now and we would like to meet you. We were wondering if maybe you could tell us your name so we would know what to call you when we pass by. We're also curious about if you live around here. Maybe we're neighbors. That would be neat. My dad works at the Van De Kamps down the street and if you want we could get you some free desserts.

Yours Truly,

Pam Sharp and
Joseph McAuley

I look up at the man and am looking for an expression on his face. The man sticks the note in his pocket.

"My name is Joseph," I say and hold out my hand.

The man's thin frame bends down and picks up the grape soda bottle. He holds his head back and drinks the last few drops

of the, now, hot juice. He coughs and then in a deep hoarse voice whispers, "Leave me alone." I look across the street and see Pam staring out the Fatburger window. I stand up and slowly cross towards her. I hear a rumbling behind me, a screech and when I turn around he is gone. The bus is turning down the corner and all I see now is the thick cloud of black exhaust fumes.

Pam's mother honks the horn and I get into the back of the Sedan. Pam rides shotgun. Pam doesn't say it, but she hates me. She looks at me and in her head she is yelling. She is yelling at me. Saying how could you have let him get away. Pam's mother is adjusting her rear view mirror and is humming along with the tune that is on the radio. It is dark outside and I look up at the moon. It crowns the Fotomat, Fatburger and the entire city. When Mrs. Sharp pulls out onto the road, the moon follows. The moon turns with every turn of the road. It disappears every now and then behind a building or a billboard, but it always reappears.

I picture him. He is on the bus, holding on to the metal bar in front of him. He is sitting alone. The bus is fairly empty. He looks out the window and behind the blank face and dead lids, he is looking at the same moon and for that moment we are connected.

Pam turns around and says, "Did you at least see what color his eyes were?"

I shrug my shoulders and mouth the word, "No."

"Whose eyes?" says her mother above the music.

"No one," Pam says and turns up the radio.