

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

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Neighbors

In the morning a yellow cab sounded its horn and Shireen could hear the husband and wife fighting while it waited. They'd fought through the night and it was now almost six and Shireen wondered why they'd waited so long if one of them was going to leave anyway. They could've called a cab anytime. The children hadn't slept the night, either. Shireen had heard them, too, screeching over their parents' rage, wailing like they were trapped in a hellish dream.

Shireen watched as the cab driver got impatient behind the wheel. He gave his horn three more blasts, holding the third one longer. He'd just opened his door when the wife finally came out, pushing the children in front of her. The twin girls were struggling to get into identical pink coats over their pajamas in almost synchronized confusion and haste. Shireen touched her heart when she saw their puffy, tear-streaked faces. Their mother hustled them into the back seat.

The husband came out. He was in t-shirt, jeans, and bare feet. It was March, the morning frigid. Frosty breath streamed out of the faces of the husband and wife in thick white jets. They stood at arm's length, not talking. The girls' faces appeared in the cab's window, two little moons of fear watching their parents looking at each other, finally out of things to shout.



"Well, that's too bad," said Hanif. "Who knew? They looked so normal. Maybe she'll come back."

"Those poor children," said Shireen.

Hanif yawned. Shireen imagined him still in his t-shirt and lungi, his hair in clumps with the previous day's pomade, the patchwork growth of stubble on his cheeks yet to be shaved with his careful attention down to the skin.

"You sound tired," she said.

"I couldn't sleep."

"Is it nice there?"

"It's a different America than Chicago," Hanif answered. "God, you must be bored to death. We'll need to get a TV, I don't care how much it costs. After this promotion."

Shireen found his expansive bouts endearing. He'd spoken like that before they bought this house, like a tycoon patting pockets fat with cash.

"I don't know what I'd watch, besides maybe the news."

Hanif laughed. "One of these days, you'll have to become American. Just like our child will be. And being American means watching a lot of TV."

"Speaking of news," said Shireen. "Anything from Dhaka?"

"More curfews, what else? More talks and more nothing getting done."

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

So, you know, just the usual. But don't worry, okay? Once I get this promotion and the baby is born, we'll go for a visit. And also get a TV." He yawned again. "Just when I have to start waking up, now the sleep comes. Listen, if you want to call your parents, call them."

"No, no need to waste money now."



Shireen wondered where the wife and children went. Maybe to the wife's parents' place. At least in this country a woman could do that with some ease. Back home, she would be condemned for dragging shame and scandal along with herself and her children to her parents' doorstep if she left her husband. In Dhaka, people believed themselves too advanced, too progressive, and too evolved to be that way, because it was backwards, illiterate village people that had such oppressive norms. The way of the city was to pretend all was well, then undo the woman strand by strand in private. The heavens would fall if their precious social standing got a scratch.

Shireen heated the previous night's leftovers for lunch, but couldn't eat more than a few bites. She started putting the food away and had a thought. It was going to go to waste the way she was eating. So much food was wasted in this country it should be a crime. She'd seen the huge dumpsters behind restaurants piled with untouched food and remarked that it could feed every beggar in Dhaka round-the-clock. Hanif had laughed. The crows and the pie-dogs would beat them to it. Shireen filled three plastic containers with rice, dal, and chicken curry. The containers were warm on her palm through the plastic bag as she walked next door.



Their name, Rutger, was stenciled on the mailbox in white. Hanif had chatted with the husband a few times on his way out to work in the morning, and Shireen saw the wife come out twice a day to send off and receive the girls to and from school. Before Shireen rang the doorbell, she gave the area a self-conscious glance over both shoulders. The houses looked empty, the neighborhood mostly deserted. A few driveways had cars parked in them. Wisps of smoke rose from a chimney here and there, and down at the end of the block she saw the white van of the post office turn onto their street.

A full minute passed before the door was answered after she pressed the bell. Shireen was turning to leave, a little relieved.

"Yes?"

The husband had opened the door halfway. His hair was wet. Shireen had partial view of an olive green sweatshirt with a university logo in white, blue jeans, and the feet bare as they had been that morning on the icy ground. His sideburns came down to just above the jawline. He hadn't yet shaved.

"I'm from next door," said Shireen. "Mrs. Rahim."

"Oh, yes, hi," said the husband, a smile startled awake on his face. "How are you?"

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

"Fine, thank you." Shireen heard the rev of the postal van's engine, small in the distance, as it moved from one house to the next. "Please." She held up the bag.

"What's this?"

"Food."

"For me?"

"Yes."

This was so utterly foolish. On top of it she was freezing, and she hadn't been outside ten minutes.

"Please take it," said Shireen, more to placate herself.

"I'm not sure I understand."

"I'm your neighbor. It's what neighbors do in my country."

"I'm sorry, but -"

"Please."

"Okay, well," the husband reached for the bag, still confused. When the aromas hit him he said, "Smells amazing."

"You can keep the containers," said Shireen.

"I still don't get it. But thank you."

"Welcome. It's nothing to get."

"Wait. Mrs. Rahim. I'm - I'm David. Won't you come in? Just for a minute?"

"No, that's okay," said Shireen.

"This is so kind of you," said David. "I mean, I have food here, but - please come in for a cup of coffee or something? Let me return the courtesy?"

The hallway was a mess of children's shoes and coats hung in a hurry on the coat rack.

"Right this way," said David leading her to the living room. "Please have a seat. I'll just put this in the kitchen. Wow, still warm and fresh."

"No," said Shireen. "It's from last night."

"I'm not complaining. I love Indian food. Someday this city will have more of it."

It's not Indian, Shireen was about to say, but David was gone.

Two bookbags, both as pink as the girls' coats were, lay side by side by the coffee table, the names Camelia and Caroline scrawled on them in black marker. On the coffee table were open coloring books, a big box of crayons on its side with its contents spilled out, a TV Guide, a silver ash-tray with a few cigarette butts, and a pack of Pall Malls, a gold lighter on top of it with D etched on it in a decorative script.

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

"Sorry about the mess," said David, coming back from the kitchen. He set down a mug of coffee and went about clearing the books and crayons by stuffing them into one of the bookbags. The mug had the same university logo as his sweatshirt.

"Do you?" he held up the pack of cigarettes.

"No. I can go now," said Shireen. She was still standing.

"Mrs. Rahim?" David lit a cigarette and clicked the lighter shut. "I'm sure the whole neighborhood heard us last night. You certainly did."

"It happens sometimes," said Shireen.

"I appreciate your generosity," David said. "Or is it pity?"

Shireen understood why he would be skeptical. She could name the people she'd known in Dhaka writhing in misery but sticking it out in marriages. For family, for children, for society. Every last one of them would deny it in the face of sympathy. They'd likely accuse her of being happy about their unhappiness.

"No," said Shireen. "It's just something from one neighbor to another."

"I don't really give a shit," David said. "About the rest of the neighborhood. These people can go to hell. Sorry. But I don't. Do you know, your husband is the only neighbor that's actually ever said hi to me? And the food? No one has *ever* done that. Please, have some coffee."

"No, that's fine," said Shireen.

"Is there anything I can say to apologize?" said David. "I mean, besides sorry."

"Apologize? To me? Why?"

"I don't know." David took a long drag of the cigarette and stubbed it out in the ashtray. He fell into the couch and hung his head forward, hands clasped between his knees. He looked like a penitent.

"I hope you enjoy the food," said Shireen.

"I'd really like it if you sat for a minute." He was looking up at her, his glassy green eyes imploring. "Susan's been wanting to come over and say hello since you moved in, but it just never happened. No excuses."

Shireen was warm in her coat and perspiring, but she didn't want to take the coat off.

"That's okay," she said.

"No, it's not," said David. "When I was a kid we talked to our neighbors, said hello, my mom brought over food, my dad smoked and talked with the men about what was going on in the world. Look at us now. Holed up in our cocoons. Uninterested. But you just said it, right? Neighbors look out for neighbors in your country. Which, where is that?"

"We're from Dhaka. East Pakistan," said Shireen. "We're Bengali." She still found herself adding this last detail even though she knew it made no difference to Americans, or anyone else not Bengalis from East Pakistan.

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

"East Pakistan?" David said. "My God, I was just talking about your elections in my class. The ones last December. I teach at Roosevelt University. Political Science. I'm an idiot for calling your food Indian. How long have you lived here?"

"It's fine," said Shireen. "Since August of '68, almost three years. We stayed for a while with my husband's cousin. Then an apartment not far from here. Before this house."

David fell into contemplation as if a complex mystery had been held to light.

"Well, wow," he said. "Mrs. Rahim, welcome to the neighborhood."

"Thank you," said Shireen. "Are your daughters fine?" she blurted. "Sorry."

"No, that's okay," said David. "I think so. They're all going to stay with Susan's sister for a few days. Sure you don't want some coffee?"

"Yes. I'll go now."



Shireen awoke from her nap much later than she'd planned, to the ringing of the doorbell. David was on the stoop rubbing his hands and blowing into them. Shireen's eyes fell on his feet. He was wearing a pair of blue running shoes with yellow diagonal stripes, the laces untied.

"Mrs. Rahim, you need to turn on your TV."

"Why? What is it? We don't have a TV."

David's eyes widened, but only briefly.

"Come with me. Please. Mrs. Rahim?"

"What is it?" said Shireen, but David was off the stoop and headed back to his house.

Shireen walked out as she was, no coat, just her sari, the wind biting her flesh as soon as she was outside.

The news was blaring on the TV in David's living room, the anchor's low, deep voice distorted by the high volume, his tone ominous.

On the screen were tanks and soldiers and army jeeps patrolling the streets of a city. It was not a city in America. Shireen felt a flutter in her stomach, a slow numbness take over her arms and legs.

The anchor's face came back on and he updated anyone just tuning in that the events they were covering had taken place in Dhaka, East Pakistan over the last several hours, where the army had taken over the city and placed it under martial law.

Shireen thought for a moment she was still asleep and this was all a dream. And then she felt David's hand on her arm. The footage was repeated several times, Dhaka and its streets more alien the harder Shireen tried to recognize them. In the grainy distance there were black smudges on the horizon. The smoke of a city on fire.

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

"Mrs. Rahim, I'm so sorry," said David. Shireen didn't respond, and she didn't notice that David was now holding her hand.

"I should go," she said, suddenly, snapping out of her shock.



"Where have you been?" Hanif yelled into the phone. "I've been calling for the last one hour." He rambled breathlessly about what had happened in Dhaka, which was no more than a summary of the footage Shireen had already seen.

"Have you talked to anyone in Dhaka?"

"No. All the lines are down."

"Do you think this is it, Hanif?"

"This is what?"

"I don't know. War?"

"Voice of America is saying there was a declaration of independence. Did you try the radio?"

"No. When are you coming?"

"Shireen, for God's sake, I'm coming back when I'm supposed to come back. What will that help?"

Shireen leaned her head on the wall next to the phone and closed her eyes.

"I don't know," she said.

"Listen to the radio," said Hanif. "I'm going to keep calling Dhaka."

"Call me when you know."

She couldn't sleep. She'd tried eating but the sight of food was revolting. She fussed with the radio and gave up. It needed new batteries. She looked out the living room window several times, but there was no way of telling if David was awake or not. The house was dark, as every other house on the street.

She dialed the operator.

There was no connection to Dhaka, the operator came back on and told her.

It was the middle of the night. Even if there was news, she wouldn't know it till the morning.

"I'm sorry," said Shireen, when David opened the door. Only now did she feel a little embarrassed that they didn't have a TV, or a working radio.

"Not at all." David smiled. Shireen felt her face grow warm.

The living room had been cleaned up. The bookbags were gone, the ashtray was clean. On her way in Shireen had noticed the children's shoes were no longer in the hallway, and the coatrack had been straightened up as well.

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

"I was anxious," she said. "I know this isn't right, me being here, this late."

"We're neighbors," David said. "It's what we do, right? Please sit. Technically it's morning, right?"

"How is your wife and your children?"

David sat down next to her, his movement slow and tired. He too looked like he hadn't slept.

"Depends," he said. "I guess a few hours of thinking by herself was all she needed. With a little help from big sister."

"Has something happened?"

"You could say that. She doesn't think," he took a breath, "that we should stay together anymore." He tapped a cigarette out of the pack and lit it.

"You mean divorce?" said Shireen.

"She didn't use the word, but what else could it be, right?" He gave her a look as though he wanted her to disprove it. Shireen kept her head down. He was close enough that she could smell his scent of stale after-shave.

"She's just angry now," said Shireen. "Let her come back. Talk face to face. It makes a difference."

"I don't know that it will. Talk just leads to what you, the whole neighborhood, heard. We've been like that from the beginning. I guess we were just too stubborn to admit it. It's just gotten worse this last year. Denial can be strong when it wants. It's just – the kids, you know?"

"Yes."

"Jesus," David covered his face with both hands, "my parents, her parents, it'll be a mess. Mrs. Rahim? You have family back in your country, right?"

"Yes, of course."

"Have you talked to them?"

Shireen shook her head once. She didn't want to think about it, had kept it at a distance, and now she felt a heat at the back of her throat, a sting in her eyes.

"I'm so sorry." David took her hand. Shireen tensed up for a second, but she didn't pull away. It didn't feel wrong. His hand was warm and soft, the palm a miniature damp cushion. "Your husband, is he out of town? I haven't seen him in a few days."

"He's in Alabama for job training. For a promotion."

"That's great, that's wonderful news. But I'm sure you miss him right now. Especially now."

"I'm sure you miss your wife, too."

David brought Shireen's hand to his face, and again Shireen's im-

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

pulse made her tense up, and again she didn't pull her hand back. David pressed the hand to his forehead and then to his cheek.

The phone exploded. David dropped Shireen's hand as if someone had burst through the front door. Shireen's face caught fire. The phone kept ringing. Shireen wondered if hers was ringing too, Hanif filling with impatience on the other end. David didn't answer the phone. It rang ten, eleven, a dozen times and stopped.

Shireen stood up. Her arm brushed his knee as she did. The phone started ringing again.