

Call Us When You Need Us

Sam Pickett

I follow dad across the road through the moonlit cold towards the neighbors' house. All their lights are on. We go up the driveway, crunching leaves, and approach the front door.

Dad knocks on the door's glass, then pulls it open. An alert system chirps. He pokes his head in, lowers his mask below his lip and yells out to make our presence known. A small reply from somewhere. "Betty," he says. "Where you at?"

"In here." From the hall to the right.

Dad steps inside, so I step inside. He pulls his mask up and pinches it on the bridge of his nose. I have never been inside the neighbors' house before, but I don't take a look around. It is warm, bright. I follow dad.

Miss Betty jumps as we appear in the hallway. She is a little old lady, with short dyed-dark hair and bright red lipstick. She looks at dad. She looks at me. Then she cocks her head sideways and her eyebrows go up. "Oh, hi," she says to me.

"Hi," I say, and I smile at her beneath my mask. I look past her, down the hallway. The lights are on in every room. There is a double-doored closet to the left with a towel draped over one of the doorknobs. Below that there is a wet red splatter soaked thoroughly into the carpet. Blood. I return my attention to Miss Betty. She's smiling at me.

"Wow. It's been awhile," she says.

"It's been awhile," I say, looking at the blood on the floor.

"How've you been?"

"I've been okay."

"Betty," dad says. "On the phone you said—"

"Oh. Yes. John is sitting up now. He's in there." She gestures at the bathroom at the far end of the hallway. In the doorframe there are two pale bare knees peeking, and grunting and breathing emanating from inside. "You two sit in the living room while I put his pants on. I'll call you when I need you."

“Okay,” dad says.

I follow dad to the living room. He sits on the couch, so I sit on the couch. I peel my shirt away from my back, and now I look for the thermostat. There are stacks of books lining the walls, and shelves above them displaying hundreds of little porcelain angels striking various poses. Some pray. Others weep. Most are infantine. I look at myself and dad reflected in a big wall-mounted Sony tv from the mid 2000s as Miss Betty says, “Hold on, hold on, John,” and Mr. John grunts and breathes. Dad looks at the ceiling. He taps his feet and patters his fingers on his kneecaps. A Holy Bible sits on the coffee table in front of the couch, on a black hardcover book without a dust jacket. I slide it out and open it up down the middle. Both pages are blank. I thumb through it a bit and discover that every page is blank, so then I turn it over and look at the title on the spine. *Reasons to Vote for Democrats: A Comprehensive Guide*, by Michael Knowles.

“Okay. He’s ready.” Miss Betty’s voice.

In the Sony TV screen, I see her standing in the hallway, looking at me looking at her. Dad stands up, so I stand up and place the book down. I follow dad to the hallway.

I find the thermostat on the way. It reads eighty-two degrees and I believe it.

We step over the blood on the floor.

Dad goes into the bathroom. I stand outside. Miss Betty is fitting slippers onto Mr. John’s feet—they are all I can see of him in the doorway. “Hey neighbor,” Mr. John says from beyond the off-white wall.

“Hey neighbor,” dad says, his hands on his hips. “Hear you might’ve taken a spill.”

“Heh. Sure as hell did. I—”

“He managed to crawl in here and pull himself up on the toilet,” Miss Betty cuts in. “I didn’t know if I should call but I saw your lights were on and the cars in the driveway and he didn’t want me to call an ambulance.”

“Because I’m not dying and old men fall all the time,” Mr. John says. “I just need some help over to the couch. That’s all I need. No ambulance.”

“No no,” dad says, looking at Miss Betty. “You call us whenever you need us.” Then he extends his hand towards Mr. John.

A frail hand reaches out and latches onto dad's forearm. A bald head comes into frame.

"Get the other side of him," dad says to me.

I go inside the bathroom, and I get the other side of Mr. John. I place a hand in his armpit and use my other as a guiding counterbalance. Not that I need one. There is no weight to Mr. John at all. I'll pull his arm off if I walk too fast. He breathes and he grunts and he farts all the way down the hallway as Dad and I lead him.

"Sorry fellahs," Mr. John says.

"You're alright," Dad says. "You're alright."

We step over the blood on the floor.

We cross the living room slowly, the porcelain angels clinking along with each one of our steps. Then we lower Mr. John onto the couch. He sinks in, grunting and disheveled, his gut hanging out the bottom of his t-shirt and his pants a little too low.

Miss Betty brushes by. "Thank you both so much." She sits down and situates him.

"Absolutely, Betty. We're your neighbors," dad says. "We're sure about that ambulance?"

"Are you sure about that ambulance?" Miss Betty asks Mr. John.

"I'm sure about that goddamn ambulance," Mr. John says. "I'm not dying or anything like that. It's the clot acting up. I got a little faint and fell, is all. Old men fall all the time."

"He's got a blood clot," Miss Betty says to dad.

"Oh no," dad says.

"They say it's because of the vaccine."

"They say that?"

"They say it might be. I don't know about you but we're not going to get that booster. They might make us all get one. We're going to refuse it if they do. They

haven't done enough research.”

Dad nods at the floor.

Mr. John grunts.

“Well,” dad says. “I think research is good.”

“I agree,” Miss Betty says. “And we need to kick that old guy out of the office.”

Dad chuckles. “I think there are a lot of old guys in office we should get rid of. Unless we had John here at the helm.”

“What?” Mr John says.

Miss Betty rubs his knee. “You'd get it all set straight, wouldn't you?” she says to him.

Then Mr. John lurches forward, coughing and gagging. Miss Betty pats his back.

We all look at him.

“What?” Mr. John says. “I'm not dying.”

“Just making sure,” dad says.

Mr. John laughs.

“Yes sir. John would whip things into shape,” dad says.

Everybody agrees.

“Whelp,” dad says. “If you are positive about the ambulance, I think we'll get going here if you two are situated.” He steps towards the door. I do too.

Miss Betty gets up, and she follows us. The three of us stand by the door. “Thank you both so much,” she says.

“Absolutely,” dad says.

“We're always able to count on you two. I miss that one being around to mow the lawn.” Miss Betty points at me.

“Same here.” Dad slaps my shoulder. “Call us when you need us, Betty.”

“I will,” she says. “Thank you.”

“And you take care of yourself, John,” he talks past Miss Betty.

“What?” Mr. John’s voice from the living room.

Then dad opens the glass door, and I follow him back outside. The chilly night breeze is a relief. The door swings shut behind us, the hinges hissing. Miss Betty waves at us as we walk across the road towards our house.

“They’re sort of weird,” I say to dad.

“Yeah. But they’re our neighbors,” he says.

“Yeah.”