



Next Door

by Tobias Wolff

I wake up afraid. My wife is sitting on the edge of my bed, shaking me. 'They're at it again' she says.

I go to the window. All their lights are on, upstairs and down, as if they have money to burn. He yells, she screams something back, the dog barks. There is a short silence then the baby cries, poor thing.

Better not stand there,' says my wife. 'They might see you.' I say, 'I'm going to call the police,' knowing she won't let me.

'Don't,' she says.

She's afraid that they will poison our cat if we complain.

Next door the man is still yelling, but I can't make out what he's saying over the dog and the baby. The woman laughs, not really meaning it, ' Ha! Ha! Ha!', and suddenly gives a sharp little cry. Everything goes quiet.

'He struck her,' my wife says. 'I felt it just the same as if he struck me.'

Next door the baby gives a long wail and the dog starts up again. The man walks out into the driveway and slams the door.

'Be careful,' my wife says. She gets back into her bed and pulls the cover up to her neck.

The man mumbles to himself and jerks at his fly. Finally he gets it open and walks over to our fence. It's a white picket fence, ornamental more than anything else. It couldn't keep anyone out. I put it in myself, and planted honeysuckle and bougainvillea all along it.

My wife says, 'What's he doing?'

'Shh,' I say.

He leans against the fence with one hand and then with the other he goes to the bathroom on the flowers. He walks the length of the fence like that, not missing any of them. When he's through he gives Florida a shake, then zips up and heads back across the driveway. He almost slips on the gravel but he catches himself and curses and goes into the house, slamming the door again.

When I turn around my wife is leaning forward, watching me. She raises her eyebrows. 'Not again,' she says.

I nod.

'Between him and the dog it's a wonder you can get anything to grow out there.'

I would rather talk about something else. It depresses me, thinking about the flowers. They are past their prime, but still. Next door the woman is shouting. 'Listen to that,' I say.

'I used to feel sorry for her,' my wife says. 'Not any more. Not after last month.'

'Ditto,' I say, trying to remember what happened last month to make my wife not feel sorry for the woman next door. I don't feel sorry for her either, but then I never have. She yells at the baby, and excuse me, but I'm not about to get all excited over someone who treats a child like that. She screams things like 'I thought I told you to stay in your bedroom!' and here the baby can't even talk yet.

As far as her looks, I guess you would have to say she's pretty. But it won't last. She doesn't have good bone structure. She has a soft look to her, like she has never eaten anything but doughnuts and milk shakes. Her skin is white. The baby takes after her, not that you would expect it to take after him, dark and hairy. Even with his shirt on you can tell that he has hair all over his back and on his shoulders, thick and springy like an Airedale's.

Now they're all going at once over there, plus they've got the stereo turned on full blast. One of those bands. 'It's the baby I feel sorry for,' I say.

My wife puts her hands over her ears. 'I can't stand another minute of it,' she says. She takes her hands away. 'Maybe there's something on TV.' She sits up. 'See who's on *Johnny Carson*.'