PAUL THEROUX

NEIGHBORS

I had two neighbors at Overstrand Mansions – we shared the same landing. In America ‘neighbor’ has a friendly connotation; in England it is a chilly word, nearly always a stranger, a map reference more than anything else. One of my neighbors was called R. Wigley; the other had no nameplate.

It did not surprise me at all that Corner Door had no nameplate. He owned a motorcycle and kept late nights. He wore leather – I heard it squeak; and boots – they hit the stairs like hammers on an anvil. His motorcycle was a Kawasaki – Japanese of course. The British are patriotic only in the abstract, and they can be traitorously frugal – tax havens are full of Brits. They want value for money, even when they are grease monkeys, bikers with skinny faces and sideburns and teeth missing, wearing jackboots and swastikas. That was how I imagined Corner Door, the man in 4C.

I had never seen his face, though I had heard him often enough. His hours were odd; he was always rushing off at night and returning in the early morning – waking me when he left and waking me again when he came back. He was selfish and unfriendly, scatterbrained, thoughtless – no conversation but plenty of bike noise. I pictured him wearing one of those German helmets that look like kettles, and I took him to be a coward at heart, who sneaked around whining until he had his leather suit and his boots on, until he mounted his too-big Japanese motorcycle, which he kept in the entryway of Overstrand Mansions, practically blocking it. When he was suited up and mounted on his bike he was a Storm Trooper with blood in his eye.

It also struck me that this awful man might be a woman, an awful woman. But even after several months there I never saw the person from 4C face to face. I saw him – or her – riding away, his back, the chrome studs patterned on his jacket. But women didn’t behave like this. It was a man.

R. Wigley was quite different – he was a civil servant: Post Office, Welsh I think, very methodical. He wrote leaflets. The Post Office issued all sorts of leaflets – explaining pensions, television licenses, road tax, driving permits, their savings bank, and everything else, including of course stamps. The leaflets were full of directions and advice. In this complicated literate country you were expected to read your way out of difficulty.

When I told Wigley I wouldn’t be in London much longer than a couple of years, he became hospitable. No risk, you see. If I had been staying for a long time he wouldn’t have been friendly – wouldn’t have dared. Neighbors are a worry: they stare, they

presume, they borrow things, they ask you to forgive them their trespasses. In the most privacy-conscious country in the world neighbors are a problem. But I was leaving in a year or so, and I was an American diplomat – maybe I was a spy! He suggested I call him Reg.

We met at the Prince Albert for a drink. A month later, I had him over with the Scadutos, Vic and Marietta, and it was then that talk turned to our neighbors. Wigley said there was an actor on the ground floor and that several country Members of Parliament lived in Overstrand Mansions when the Commons was in session. Scaduto asked him blunt questions I would not have dared to ask, but I was glad to hear his answers. Rent? Thirty-seven pounds a week. Married? Had been – no longer. University? Bristol. And when he asked Wigley about his job, Scaduto listened with fascination and then said, 'It's funny, but I never actually imagined anyone writing those things. It doesn't seem like real writing.'

Good old Skiddoo.

Wigley said, 'I assure you, it's quite real.'

Scaduto went on interrogating him – Americans are tremendous questioners – but Wigley's discomfort made me reticent. The British confined conversation to neutral impersonal subjects, resisting any effort to be trapped into friendship. They got to know each other by allowing details to slip out, little mentions that, gathered together, became revelations. The British liked having secrets – they had lost so much else – and that was one of their secrets.

Scaduto asked, 'What are your other neighbors like?'

I looked at Wigley. I wondered what he would say. I would not have dared to put the question to him.

He said, 'Some of them are incredibly noisy and others downright frightening.'

This encouraged me. I said, 'Our Nazi friend with the motorcycle, for one.'

Had I gone too far?

'I was thinking of that prig, Hurst,' Wigley said, 'who has the senile Labrador that drools and squitters all over the stairs.'

'I've never seen our motorcyclist,' I said. 'But I've heard him. The bike. The squeaky leather shoulders. The boots.' I caught Wigley's eye. 'It's just the three of us on this floor, I guess.'

I had lived there just over two months without seeing anyone else.

Wigley looked uncertain, but said, ‘I suppose so.’

‘My kids would love to have a motorcycle,’ Marietta Scaduto said. ‘I’ve got three hulking boys, Mr Wigley.’

I said, ‘Don’t let them bully you into buying one.’

‘Don’t you worry,’ Marietta said. ‘I think those things are a menace.’

‘Some of them aren’t so bad,’ Wigley said. ‘Very economical.’ He glanced at me. ‘So I’ve heard.’

‘It’s kind of an image-thing, really. Your psychologists will tell you all about it.’ Skiddoo was pleased with himself: he liked analyzing human behavior – ‘deviants’ were his favorites, he said. ‘It’s classic textbook-case stuff. The simp plays big tough guy on his motorcycle. Walter Mitty turns into Marlon Brando. It’s an aggression thing. Castration complex. What do you do for laughs, Reg?’

Wigley said, ‘I’m not certain what you mean by laughs.’

‘Fun,’ Scaduto said. ‘For example, we’ve got one of these home computers. About six thousand bucks, including some accessories – hardware, software. Christ, we’ve had hours of fun with it. The kids love it.’

‘I used to be pretty keen on aircraft,’ Wigley said, and looked very embarrassed saying so, as if he were revealing an aberration in his boyhood.

Scaduto said, ‘Keen in what way?’

‘Taking snaps of them,’ Wigley said.

‘Snaps?’ Marietta Scaduto said. She was smiling.

‘Yes,’ Wigley said. ‘I had one of those huge Japanese cameras that can do anything. They’re absolutely idiot-proof and fiendishly expensive.’

‘I never thought anyone taking dinky little pictures of planes could be described as “keen.”’ Scaduto said the word like a brand name for ladies’ underwear.

‘Some of them were big pictures,’ Wigley said coldly.

‘Even big pictures,’ Scaduto said. ‘I could understand flying in the planes, though.

Getting inside, being airborne, and doing the loop-the-loop.'

Wigley said, 'They were bombers.'

'Now you're talking, Reg!' Scaduto's sudden enthusiasm warmed the atmosphere a bit, and they continued to talk about airplanes.

'My father had an encyclopedia,' Wigley said. 'You looked up "aeroplane." It said, "Aeroplane: See Flying-Machine."'

Later, Marietta said, 'These guys on their motorcycles, I was just thinking. They really have a problem. Women never do stupid things like that.'

Vic Scaduto said, 'Women put on long gowns, high heels, padded bras. They pile their hair up, they pretend they're princesses. That's worse, fantasy-wise. Or they get into really tight provocative clothes, all tits and ass, swinging and bouncing, lipstick, the whole bit, cleavage hanging down. And then – I'm not exaggerating – and then they say, "Don't touch me or I'll scream."'

Good old Skiddoo.

'You've got a big problem if you think that,' Marietta said. She spoke then to Wigley. 'Sometimes the things he says are sick.'

Wigley smiled and said nothing.

'And he works for the government,' Marietta said. 'You wouldn't think so, would you?'

That was it. The Scadutos went out arguing, and Wigley left. A highly successful evening, I thought.

Thanks to Scaduto's pesterings I knew much more about Wigley. He was decent, he was reticent, and I respected him for the way he handled Good Old Skiddoo. And we were no more friendly than before. That was all right with me: I didn't want to be burdened with his friendship any more than he wanted to be lumbered with mine. I only wished that the third tenant on the floor was as gracious a neighbor as Wigley.

Would Wigley join me in making a complaint? He said he'd rather not. That was the British way – don't make a fuss, Reggie.

He said, 'To be perfectly frank, he doesn't actually bother me.'

This was the first indication I'd had that it was definitely a man, not a woman.

‘He drives me up the wall sometimes. He keeps the craziest hours. I’ve never laid eyes on him, but I know he’s weird.’

Wigley smiled at me and I immediately regretted saying He’s weird, because, saying so, I had revealed something of myself.

I said, ‘I can’t make a complaint unless you back me up.’

‘I know.’

I could tell that he thought I was being unfair. It created a little distance, this annoyance of mine, which looked to him like intolerance. I knew this because Wigley had a girl friend and didn’t introduce me. A dozen times I heard them on the stairs. People who live alone are authorities on noises. I knew their laughs. I got to recognize the music, the bed-springs, the bath water. He did not invite me over.

And of course there was my other subject, the Storm Trooper from 4C with his thumping jackboots at the oddest hours. I decided at last that wimpy little Wigley (as I now thought of him) had become friendly with him, perhaps ratted on me and told him that I disliked him.

Wigley worked at Post Office Headquarters, at St Martin’s-le-Grand, taking the train to Victoria and then the tube to St Paul’s. I sometimes saw him entering or leaving Battersea Park Station while I was at the bus stop. Occasionally, we walked together to or from Overstrand Mansions, speaking of the weather.

One day, he said, ‘I might be moving soon.’

I felt certain he was getting married. I did not ask.

‘Are you sick of Overstrand Mansions?’

‘I need a bigger place.’

He was definitely getting married.

I had the large balcony apartment in front. Wigley had a two-room apartment just behind me. The motorcyclist’s place I had never seen.

‘I wish it were the Storm Trooper who was leaving, and not you.’

He was familiar with my name for the motorcyclist.

‘Oh, well,’ he said, and walked away.

Might be moving, he had said. It sounded pretty vague. But the following Friday he was gone. I heard noise and saw the moving van in front on Prince of Wales Drive. Bumps and curses echoed on the stairs. I didn't stir – too embarrassing to put him on the spot, especially as I had knocked on his door that morning, hoping for the last time to get him to join me in a protest against the Storm Trooper. I'm sure he saw me through his spy-hole in the door – Wigley, I mean. But he didn't open. So he didn't care about the awful racket the previous night – boots, bangs, several screams. Wigley was bailing out and leaving me to deal with it.

He went without a word. Then I realized he had sneaked away. He had not said good-bye; I had never met his girl friend; he was getting married – maybe already married. British neighbors!

I wasn't angry with him, but I was furious with the Storm Trooper, who had created a misunderstanding between Wigley and me. Wigley had tolerated the noise and I had hated it and said so. The Storm Trooper had made me seem like a brute!

But I no longer needed Wigley's signature on a complaint. Now there were only two of us here. I could go in and tell him exactly what I thought of him. I could play the obnoxious American. Wigley's going gave me unexpected courage. I banged on his door and shook it, hoping that I was waking him up. There was no answer that day or any day. And there was no more noise, no Storm Trooper, no motorcycle, from the day Wigley left.