

Just A Neighbor

By C J Nolan

A man in his mid-50's, WILLIAM, sits on his couch in his living room. The furniture is worn. Not shabby, but obviously a decade or more from "new". On top of the low table in front of him is an ashtray, a "rocks" glass half filled with whiskey and an old photo album. It is late at night. The man speaks to someone unseen in a nearby room.

WILLIAM

Wow. Gosh, buddy. These are great! I've got... What's this? Book Two of the pictures. How come I never knew? They were right up there – on the shelf. Walk by them every night. I tell ya – it's the little stuff. Pass ya right by. *(Looking)* Damn. I remember... I remember this. Geez. That's – that's Jimmy Gage and his wife. When we were in North Jersey. Remember? They lived just down the street, in the blue colonial. What was the wife's name? Eh – Jean? Yeah! Jimmy and Jean. I always liked them. That was our first house - up in Montclair. I remember... These pictures are from that big Bicentennial picnic we had. I can tell because of that cake you made, the one that looked like a flag? With blueberries and strawberries and Cool Whip all spread out. Gosh, you look so young there. You were always the prettiest girl. My angel. You and I – both such kids! Hell, we all were. Look at the group of us. Good jobs, good teeth, owning houses, having babies. You're fearless when you're young. Just unconscious. *(Pause)* Ah! Here's pictures of Davey and Mary. Wait... No baby pictures? There must be some somewhere. Maybe another book? I know I wasn't around much, especially after they

transferred me to Philly. But... I know I took some baby pictures. *(Pause)* This is the new house. In Morestown. They must be about seven and nine here. I guess. Halloween pictures – yeah. Davey's dressed as Casper and Mary worn that witch costume you made. They're adorable. Holding hands. We used to hold hands and walk around the block. I loved holding their little hands... *(Pause)* I know that was hard on you, buddy. Leavin' that beautiful house... Even though, as you said, it was really too small. Leaving your friends. Our friends. Moving away from your folks... But you never complained. You said schools were better here anyway and the neighborhood was good for the kids. You always said we'd make it work. And we did. Not a bad house. Not a bad life for ten years or so.... Look – graduation pictures. Book Four. You look so proud with each of them. I remember... Mary made a wonderful speech, didn't she? And Davey – despite all his troubles – still got his diploma. I mean... okay so he had a brush or two with “johnny law”. But what young man doesn't? They both grew up good and strong and you.... buddy you – you were the glue. The house clean. The meals on time. Clothes folded. Everything just right. Just right... Why can't things stay the same, huh? I always ask God – why does it all keep movin'? Why can't we just stay still? It was right after this picture they closed the office. Let me go. “Downsized” they say now. Stupid fucking word. Fired is fired. You can't make it sound good. *(Pause)* But there you were, right? What did you say? ‘We can get through this’ – right? You said, ‘Bill, you're not dead at 42. There's a place out there for you. We'll find it together. I believe in you'. You said all

that, buddy. And once again we were packing our lives into boxes. *(Pause)* Heh... Ya know, I must have taken most of these pictures 'cause I'm not in any of them. That's a kick. 'Cause I was wondering what I looked like back then. There are no pictures of me with my children. Or me with you. For that matter. I wondered how I looked. Did I look proud? Did I look strong? Did I look afraid? I don't remember anymore. The mind just sort of... washes things away. *(Pause)* There are no pictures of the house by the shore. No matter what you say – it was a dump. It needed so much work! I just hated the place. I hated it for both of us!... But what can you do, right? That was the best we could do. Times were hard then. But you! Always the cockeyed optimist you. You made it a home. Even working fulltime at the Foodtown... Now that – that hurt me, buddy. It really hurt. A man should be able to care for his family. That's a man's job. And I know the work wasn't steady or nothing but... god, buddy... I tried so hard... I was at that one place for three years and was on my way. Moving back up! But... I think... there was... something was broke... inside. I didn't know. I mean – how did I get from Montclair to here? See? You – you create a movie of your life. And somewhere along the way – something happens. And the screen goes blank. And you have to start all over again. But how? How do you do that – start your life all over again? Where do you start with all those debts? Mortgages. Credit cards. Car payments. Student loans. How?! With failures on your record! With gray in your hair and your eyes have gone quiet. With the children! My God. One who is on his own path and you can't save him. And another who... won't

even look at you. Won't talk to you anymore. I guess I just can't apologize enough. You forgave me - didn't you, buddy? I was drunk. I - I never laid a hand on you before in my life... But Mary can't forgive. That's always been her weakness. She wouldn't even speak to me at Davey's funeral. As if it was all my fault. I did everything I could for that boy!

(Pause) I know you talked to her. Tried to set her straight... Maybe she's right... maybe I am to blame... *(Takes a drink)* I can't believe how small this apartment is. So small. It's all so tight. You can barely move around. Barely breathe. I'm not blamin' you, buddy. I know. Believe me - it's all we could afford. But... christ, there isn't even a guest room. Not that anyone would visit but... And we can't even have the neighbors over... whoever they are. *(Takes another drink and looks around the room.)* Look at all these photo albums. Look at all these pictures! Who are these people? They're not us. Nope. Not us. They're of someone else. Pictures of someone else's lives. They belong in the past. They stay in the past. Because the present kills the past. Kills it. *(Pause)* Okay. Okay buddy - now's the time. I have to... I have to tell you why. See - ya know that job I had? Cleaning up at the drugstore? Truth is.... Well, they fired me... three weeks ago. I was drinkin' and showed up late a few times and... The past few weeks? When you thought I was at work? I was really at the bar or sitting on the beach. All day. Just... eating the sandwiches you made for me and sitting on the beach. And those letters we've been getting? From the building? Those are eviction notices. I know - you would never open the mail so I threw them out. But - I haven't paid any rent... for a while now... the

money just... *(Pause)* I am so sorry. I tried everything I could. I tried my best. But it just wasn't getting any better. But the worst part? The worst thing? That was knowing I could come home and tell you all I had done and all the mistakes and cry into your shoulder again and you – buddy, you would say, 'It's all right. We'll find a way. We can start over again.' *(Pause)* I couldn't take that , buddy. I'm sorry. I couldn't stand to see that look on your face again... And... I just can't start over. Not again... *(WILLIAM pulls a small caliber gun out of his pocket and places it on the table in front of him. Then he takes the phone, picks up the receiver and dials.)* Hello? 9-1-1? Yes. I have an emergency. Please send someone to the apartments on 345 Broad Street. Red Bank. Apartment 3E. Right now! What? Oh my God.... There are these two people. I – I heard a noise. Down the hall. So I came over. The door was open. Yes. Two people. A couple. A man and his wife. The woman...is on her bed. It looks like she's sleeping... But she's still. There's a pillow on her face. She won't wake up... And – and the man... The man is in the living room. Yes. Dead. It looks like he shot himself. Please come quickly. I gotta... What?

What?

Who am I?

I'm ... I'm just a neighbor.

BLACK OUT

THE END