**Good Neighbors by Daniel Pope**

**THERESA AND I** had done our share of shouting before the quarantine, sure. Once I dropped a plate in the sink. It broke. There were tears in my eyes and I said things that I never thought I could say, things I never thought I could believe. Things I didn’t believe then. *You don’t love me. You don’t want me here anymore.* Shouting wasn’t in Theresa’s nature. But she was ruthless. It wasn’t even what she said, which was usually something like, *Stop it, now* or *You’re not being yourself.* It was how she said it, with her dark brow making a precipitous ridge between her narrowed eyes. Her anger was white and cold. It sent seams of ice through my heart.

It seemed to say that I *was* being myself—that it was, in fact, my true self coming out then, and that my wax mask of solicitude and love had melted.

But soon the right words would be spoken, and a delicate harmony would return. We would cry, embrace each other, make love. Afterward, sometimes my heartbeat would line up with the rhythm of the music coming from the apartment below.

Ever since we moved in, before we got the cats, nearly every day we heard the music filtering up through the hardwood floor, urgent bass lines and throbbing electronic drums. The same phrases over and over, which meant that our downstairs neighbor was either practicing her performance or mixing a recording. At night, the low tones clung to the edge of my consciousness, delaying sleep but not stopping it. It was a minor nuisance. But the thin floor creaking beneath our heavy steps was a major nuisance for her, and she made sure we knew it.

The first time she knocked—this was months before the pandemic—I was alone in the apartment. I swept aside the clothes hanging from the hooks and squinted through the peephole. We didn’t get many visitors. Seeing nothing, after a moment I opened the door inward and at first still didn’t see her, she was so short. She had close-cropped dark hair, olive skin, ears full of piercings and flesh of tattoos. To attenuate the impact of my height, which I knew could come off as intimidating, I softened my face.

Hi, she said. My name is Flora—I live in the apartment below you.

I offered my hand and introduced myself. She shook it limply. I asked if everything was okay. Her slim fingers fidgeted at the waist of her tight black jeans. Above her knuckles, her navel stared darkly from a thin ribbon of flesh.

Ye-ah, she said slowly. Well, sort of. Basically—

She took a deep breath. An apologetic wave in her brow fought against the sharp anger barely hidden in her tired eyes.

The floors are really thin, she said. And I can kind of hear a lot of—footsteps. Loud ones. And I just wanted to come up and ask if you could just sort of be a little more conscientious, or mindful, of that.

Her shoulders were squared up, as though she were preparing to receive a punch in the chest. I realized I had squared mine up too, so I let them go. I exhaled through my nose and nodded, electing to focus on her apologetic eyebrows, which allowed me to take the upper hand: We will be more cognizant, I said. Then, frowning with dignity, I added: Sorry to have disturbed you.

Her shoulders fell.

Okay, she said, thanks. I appreciate it.

Theresa and I began taking our shoes off inside our apartment, but I guess it wasn’t enough. Flora left us a note, then visited us again. This time Theresa was there, and when we heard the knock, she rolled her eyes. It’s her again, she whispered from where she sat against the headboard, hugging her legs.

We had been fighting a bit, but not so bad that our neighbor *beneath us* should hear. I’ll handle it, I said.

I answered the door with a look of exasperation: Yes?

She wore sweatpants and a gray sweater with Mickey Mouse on it, probably for ironic effect. She had taken scissors to the neckline for an eighties look, and it hung crooked on her frame. One of her olive shoulders stuck out.

Yeah, she said. It’s me again, hi. She gave me a grim smile.

Hi, I said, how are you doing?

Not great, as you can imagine, she said. It’s one in the morning. I’m just below you. Apartment 307! she shouted past my shoulder.

Sharp spite caught my brain like a fishhook, but I breathed and tried to release it.

Okay, I said, I’m sorry, I’ll do my best to keep it down. But I will say—I mean, this is our apartment, we’re going to be walking around in it.

I know, she said slowly, but that doesn’t mean you need to stomp. At one in the morning.

*Stomp* was clearly an exaggeration. I nodded but straightened my back and crossed my arms. After a moment, her eyes dropped from mine.

So, just, you know, she said, be cognizant.

I noticed she used my word, so I used hers: We’ll try to be *conscientious,* I said. We’ll try to be *mindful.*

A couple of months later, with no additional visits, we got kittens. We didn’t get the cats to save the relationship, nothing like that. But I think we wanted to take a leap of faith, make a long-term commitment to each other. And we thought that with a third (and, it turned out, fourth) party in the studio apartment, it might shake up our dynamic.

Theresa named them:

This one, she said, is Birthday Boy, because he looks like he always thinks it’s his special day. And this one is Sugar Baby.

Why Sugar Baby? I asked.

Look at her, she said. She’s a spoiled little bitch. Aren’t you, Sugar Baby?

From the moment we took them home, they zoomed around constantly. No matter how much we kitten-proofed, they always found new things to knock over. When Birthday Boy bounded from the edge of the dresser to the floor in pursuit of Sugar Baby as she slid across the shiny, dark grain of the hardwood, when his feet hit the floor and, despite his small size, made a loud *thump,* in my head our downstairs neighbor sat on her bed, glaring at the wall, unable to focus on programming her beats or mixing her shitty music. The noise distracted me too—I often found myself unable to do my freelance design work because of it. Or perhaps it’s more accurate to say that I was unable to do my freelance design work because I imagined our downstairs neighbor sitting on her bed and glaring at the wall, unable to focus on making her shitty music. I got angry at the kittens. Sometimes I yelled, even though I knew they wouldn’t understand. But mostly, I just got angry at Flora.

One night the kittens toppled a potted plant, which Theresa and I hastened to clean up, Theresa grumbling because it had distracted her from writing her research paper on labor law. Once everything was put into order, minus one succulent, we heard a firm knock. Sugar Baby stuck her nose into the edge of the door. I picked her up and opened it.

Flora looked terrible. She had bags under her eyes. Behind me, Birthday Boy’s paws scrabbled across the hardwood, so I stepped out into the hall and closed the door. Immediately Sugar Baby began struggling in my arms.

Hi, I said.

Yeah, she said, hi.

She wore sweatpants and a black shirt now. Under her eyes her skin was as purple as a bruise. I squinted at her, wondering whether they indeed were bruises, for a moment worrying that perhaps there was something more serious in her personal life than having noisy neighbors—but when she tipped her face up, the shadows cleared, and I could see that they weren’t the right color. It wasn’t any more serious than sleeplessness.

In my arms, Sugar Baby let out a squeak—she was a squeaker, not so much a meower, and it was such a thin, soft, plangent sound that it made me short of breath with love. Despite herself, my visitor smiled.

Well, this explains a lot, she said.

Sugar Baby was a tuxedo cat with a white bib, white boots, and piercing amber eyes. She gave up struggling for a moment and blinked at me, struggled again, squeaked, and looked at our neighbor, who asked what her name was.

Sugar Baby, I said, and laughed.

She laughed too. Her squared shoulders relaxed. She tilted her head and narrowed her eyes playfully at the kitten. I suddenly felt very tender toward Flora.

I know she’s loud, I said. I’m sorry. I’m really trying to be conscientious. She and her brother—they’re kittens, you know—they keep us up sometimes too.

She nodded. Maybe you could get a rug, she said.

A small tongue of flame rose in me, then burned out. Okay, I said, we’ll look into that.

She nodded again, gravely. She’s cute, she said.

I know, I said, and smiled.

Sugar Baby struggled again, let out that tiny squeak, and locked eyes with me. For a moment my heart and throat swelled, and tears nipped the edges of my eyes. I hoped our neighbor wouldn’t notice.

Okay, she said, good night.

Good night, I said. And, again, I’m sorry.

She shrugged, then turned to walk away. When I went back into the apartment, Theresa was glaring at her computer.

**A week later** we received an email from the apartment manager. Flora had spoken to him about the noise. He suggested maybe a rug. Theresa responded to the email, writing: *Rugs are expensive. I’m a student and my partner is a graphic designer. We will try to save up some for a rug, but I can’t guarantee anything. They’re kittens and they want to play— there’s really only so much we can do.*

Telling on us to the apartment manager was an escalation, Theresa said, and as far as she was concerned, she just couldn’t conjure up the empathy to care anymore after that. I pointed out that our neighbor had, in fact, tried to talk to us a few times before this, but Theresa waved my words away.

Look, she said, this is our home. What are we gonna do? Not walk around?

I told her that this was about the kittens—the walking issue had gone away quickly.

Has it? she said. Is it just about the kittens, really? How loud can they be?

They can be pretty loud.

They’re tiny.

They knock things over. They jump off high places.

This is our home, Theresa said firmly. We need to feel at home. We can’t be constantly worrying about our downstairs neighbor.

She was reclined against the pillows, reading a thick law textbook. I stood scowling at the foot of the bed. She put the pale-yellow highlighter back in her teeth like a cigar, then flipped a page. Birthday Boy and Sugar Baby were curled up together at her feet, Birthday Boy, a tabby, licking the top of Sugar Baby’s head.

You mean me, I said. You mean *I* worry about her.

Yesh, she said around the highlighter. She took it out and said: And, if you’ll believe it, it’s not a super pleasant thing to see, you flinching and getting mad every time they knock a fucking pen off the table or whatever.

I crossed my arms. *This* was an escalation.

Her eyes flicked up at me, then back down at her book, which she drew closer to her face with her knees, her shoulders almost touching her ears.

I can’t just turn it off, I said after a moment. I can’t help that I kind of give a shit that we’re bothering her so much. I want to be good neighbors.

We are doing all we can, Theresa said deliberately.

I dropped my arms. My hands gathered the dark denim of my jeans, making fists.

Just *relax,* she said, her shoulders falling. She’s being a whiny bitch. It’s a noisy building. We have to listen to her shitty music all the time. She should get a white noise machine, like we did. For shit’s sake. Please just relax.

**About a week** before the beginning of the quarantine, a baby began crying next door. There was also a couple, presumably its parents, who sometimes raised their voices at each other, but these were just ambient noises, nothing serious.

Sometimes I had visions of our own future baby, a daughter, and tenderness would thicken my throat. Theresa and I hadn’t really talked about it, but I knew she wanted kids. Once, at Echo Park Lake—this was early on in our relationship—she had squealed, pointing out a little blonde girl in a lavender tulle dress and pink sneakers. Later that night, she cried next to me in bed. What’s wrong? I said. That little girl today, she said. I was just thinking about her. What do you mean? I asked, and she said: She looked like ours. What ours would look like.

I would do anything to protect her, I thought then, my future baby daughter.

Hearing again the baby’s muffled little gulping cries, I held my own Sugar Baby, coming close to tears. I kissed the top of her head, and she looked up at me with those dark golden eyes cleaved with narrow black slits. She seemed to understand something, some knowledge I couldn’t face. She stared at me until I couldn’t look anymore.

Then the pandemic, the quarantine. Everything changed. Theresa telecommuted to school and I sat with my laptop in various chairs around the apartment, waiting for websites or infographics or logos to design themselves; or, when I decided it was time to work on my own projects, I’d sit with my sketchbook open to a blank page, dredging my unconscious for a single image of something that wasn’t furniture or a kitchen appliance. But I could only daydream. I lived in the future. Once the pandemic was over, Theresa would finish law school and I would get my first gallery opening and we would have a girl. I considered sketching our future daughter with her pink sneakers and lavender tulle dress, but I was afraid that if I did that, it would become immediately clear how desperately I needed her.

Theresa and I stopped fighting, but what replaced the fighting was worse. It wasn’t silence, not exactly. There was still talk. But it was vacant talk. The words were just words, spoken by lips lit up with the blue screen of a phone or laptop; they were words disconnected from meaning, just as we were people disconnected from the world.

Sometimes, as we sat around blankly, the baby would begin to cry next door. Sometimes we would hear murmurs too, sometimes shouts. But babies cried and couples fought. Any sign of life seemed better than the blank sidewalks, the dead streets out the window. It didn’t seem like anything to worry about.

Until it did. I was in bed reading, with Sugar Baby sleeping soundly in my lap, and Theresa was at the kitchen table on her laptop. We heard the voices next door start up, soften out, then mount again, like a revving motor. Theresa and I looked up whenever it flared into something louder, angrier. Stale air hung in the room like dirty clothes on a line. When I moved, Sugar Baby squeaked in protest, then curled up on the ruffled sheets as I went to crack the kitchen window. Outside, on the street, not a single soul wandered. It was a ghost town. But the sky had never been bluer.

After I returned to bed, the voices resumed their argument. Theresa raised her eyebrows over her laptop screen. The baby’s soft, woeful cry through the wall against a backdrop of muffled claustrophobic rage suggested that something awful was happening. Everyone was trapped. All thoughts of the future were crushed by the monstrous present.

When it stopped again, I let out a breath of air and Theresa looked back down. I went back to petting Sugar Baby, but when she looked up at me, her eyes resounded with a terrible wisdom. Crumpled tinsel sunk deep into amber honey, split with darkness. I dropped my hand to the bed, stunned. She never blinked. Not once.

She didn’t blink when the voices flared back up, when the baby cried again. She didn’t blink at the scream. She didn’t blink at the *thump,* or the ring of breaking glass, not at the cutting melody of the shards like little bells hitting the floor, not at the squealing child, the crying woman—

Then a sudden mushroom cloud of silence enveloped everything. And Sugar Baby blinked.

I stood, looking sharply at Theresa. What should we do, I said.

Theresa scooted her chair back and put an ear to the wall behind her. We were silent for a moment as the voices continued, slightly softer now, one of them, the woman, meeting the escalation with appeasement. But the other voice, the roar, wasn’t appeased. I couldn’t make out anything they were saying, but there was a spinning in it, a furious sensation of repetitive motion. This was a pattern, we knew, we had heard them before—but not like this.

There was another sickening *thump.* The baby’s voice rose and broke, caught again, and wailed.

In our bare feet, we rushed down the ugly crimson rug in the hallway outside and got to the green door framed with gold-painted scrollwork: apartment 409. The voices came from just inside. I squinted down at the keyhole, as though I could see through it to the scene behind. Even from this close, I couldn’t make out what they were saying—it was the anger I heard, the volcanic flow of it from the man. His voice bubbled like lava. It crashed and struck. The woman’s anger in response went up and down, indignant and defensive, and then—there it was—fearful. Everything was shot through with streaks of crimson. There was blood in the air.

I pounded with my fist.

*What the fuck is going on in there?* I shouted.

The voices immediately stopped. A feminine voice said: The fuck?

The door opened. The woman stuck her eye to the crack, then widened it. She was pale, thin, had a septum piercing. Above and behind her floated the head of a man, also skinny, with rounded teeth in a slack mouth, darting eyes, a buzz cut.

Why’re you pounding, the woman said. Why’re you pounding so hard at our door, shit, you knocked our sign off. We were just watching a movie.

Theresa said: We’re in room 407. 407. Come over if you need to.

It was just a movie, the woman said.

It wasn’t what you thought it was, was it? the man said. It wasn’t what you thought you heard.

Okay, I said.

We appreciate the concern, the woman said, but it’s nothing. We were just watching—

We’re sorry to interrupt your night, Theresa said, we just didn’t know. We didn’t know what was happening.

We don’t know what’s happening, I said.

In the low dusty light, their faces were limned with jagged streaks like a hasty, unfinished sketch. But slowly those streaks disappeared. They firmed up into a couple, a couple who had just been fighting, that’s all. They were embarrassed. It wasn’t a big deal.

We’re in 407, Theresa said again.

Okay, the woman said. Good night.

**Back in the apartment,** I stood at the foot of the bed. Theresa went back to sit at the table. I took a few steps, as though to pace, but then stopped. My body was as calm as a corpse, but my brain was white with heat and light.

I went to put hot water on for tea. The voices murmured through the wall, calm. Were they making up?

That wasn’t a movie, I said.

Theresa didn’t say anything. I stood at the kettle for a while.

That wasn’t a movie, I said again, angrily.

I know that, Theresa said.

The knuckles of my brain loosened their grip on the moment, and the kettle slipped between the pleats of reality, becoming suddenly abstract, like a thing nearly but not quite remembered. When it started to hiss and boil, I came back to myself. I hit the button to turn it off.

There was a knock at the door.

Theresa and I looked at each other. Birthday Boy and Sugar Baby ran for the door and started to pace back and forth, sniffing at the edges. We followed them. Theresa picked up Birthday Boy and I picked up Sugar Baby. Theresa opened the door.

It was the man. He held his baby in his arms.

Hey, he said, look, I just wanted to come over and—look, my girlfriend and I, we’ve been fighting a lot. We’ve been having problems. I know that it must have sounded bad. I can’t imagine what you might have heard, and I get that it probably didn’t sound pretty and everything. But we’ve just been fighting a lot.

We’re all locked in, said Theresa, it’s been pretty tough on all of us.

Right, he said, and I don’t want to give you the impression—we have this new child, you know . . .

The baby pedaled her little feet.

Very cute, said Theresa.

I looked at her.

. . . Thank you, yes, and you know, we’ve been having some problems. I don’t know what—I can’t imagine what you’ve been hearing. I know it’s not pretty. You know, sometimes from inside it you forget how it might sound from outside. But we just, you know, we just have our problems. That’s love, right? You know?

Sugar Baby began to struggle in my arms, and Theresa looked at her, then me, then the man with the baby. His brow pinched up in the middle. Cradling his baby in one arm like a football, he rubbed his head with his knuckles. As he spoke, I couldn’t take my eyes off his rounded teeth.

I don’t want you to think that I’m being, like, *abusive* or nothing, the man continued. In his mouth, the word *abusive* was so exotic and unfamiliar, it may as well have been Klingon. I mean, he said, that’s just not who I am, not at all, you know what I mean? I hate to come off that way because that’s just not who I am.

Well, we didn’t know, Theresa said in a flat voice.

We don’t know, I said.

Right, he said. I know it doesn’t sound pretty. I just wanted to apologize. Look, we just moved in. We don’t wanna get off to a bad start here. My name is Leo.

Still holding the baby with his left arm, he stuck his right hand toward Theresa, who awkwardly reached hers out beneath Birthday Boy and shook it, bending backward at the waist. There’s a pandemic, for Christ’s sake, I thought, we’re not supposed to be touching strangers. But I didn’t say anything.

Theresa told him her name. I was silent. Now Sugar Baby was fighting to get out of my arms, letting out that plaintive squeal, so soft and breathy, so sad, it seemed almost human. I held her close, I felt her warm furry body, felt her little heart beating.

Pleasure, Leo said. And, look, you can knock on our door anytime to check up on us, okay? Or just to say hi, whatever. It’s a pleasure to meet you, and again, I just wanted to apologize—really—from the bottom of my heart, really, I’m sorry. I am.

It’s okay, said Theresa. Yeah. We’ll see you.

The baby had her thumb in her mouth. Theresa gave her a little wave, cradling Birthday Boy to her breast with her other hand. Bye bye, she said.

Leo bowed his head toward us in farewell. Then he was gone.

Theresa clicked the door shut. Sugar Baby stopped struggling. I heard a squeal escape from the back of her throat and realized I was holding her too tightly. I dropped her, and she lunged beneath the dresser.

**I felt the kettle.** It was still hot. I poured a cup of mint tea and put the big plastic jug of crusty, solidified honey in the sink, running hot water from the tap. The honey glistened and began to run thickly down the insides of the jug like melting golden wax. Theresa sat at her computer, frowning.

He dropped that movie line quick, I said.

Yeah, Theresa said. But she had that excuse ready at a moment’s notice.

After I’d fixed my tea, I put the honey away and sat down across from her, staring at the wood grain in the table. The mug was hot, but I took a sip anyway; the liquid burned my mouth, but I held it in there, wincing. Soon my mouth grew dull. After I swallowed, I felt cleaner inside, and the pounding rage behind my eyeballs had faded into the stuttering drums that beat against the floor. Had the music been playing this whole time? The thought comforted me.

From the open window came fresh air that went green in my lungs. Through the glass underscored with a verdant tangle of potted plants, the rose-colored sun was snarled in cottony, purple clouds.

We’ve done everything we can, right? I said after a moment.

They know we can hear, she said gently. They know we pay attention and that we’ll intervene. Which is more than most people can say about their neighbors. Shit, I don’t think I’ve spoken to anyone in the building since we moved in. Till now.

Me neither, I said. Except Flora, I guess.

Theresa smiled and closed her laptop and reached her hand across the table. At her touch, I felt relief dissolve the last of my anger. Pink perfused her cheeks and a couple of light hairs floated loose around her crown. I couldn’t help but think then about what she must have thought of me. Not many people would have pounded on the door like that. Not many people would have done anything. On the fight-or-flight scale, I landed firmly on fight. That’s what I thought she was thinking then, as we smiled at each other, and the corollary thought, which was that I had proven to her—despite our fights, despite all the tension in this apartment—that I could be the father of her children one day. That I would protect them from fear.

But her smile faltered and she looked down at the table.

You’re scary sometimes, she said. You know that?

What?

I don’t think you realize how scary you can be.

I was shocked. I dropped her hand and leaned back. What do you mean? I said.

She still wasn’t looking at me. I don’t think you realize it, she said again.

**Darkness** descended quickly. The music downstairs had grown frenetic, a good soundtrack for losing your mind to: blast beats, yoyo-ing bass, keys dissolving into screeching sirens. As usual, I cleaned up the dishes from the dinner I’d cooked us. Theresa’s face was blue and featureless in the laptop’s light. The baby next door cried out from time to time, but we didn’t hear any other voices.

That poor baby, I said.

Theresa looked up at me blankly. I was desperate for something from her, but I didn’t know what.

Can’t believe he brought the poor thing, I said. When he knocked on our door.

Yeah, she said, looking back down.

He was playing nice dad, I said.

She didn’t say anything, so I added: It’s fucking evil. Using his kid as a prop.

They probably just had him because they thought it would save their relationship or something, she said.

She had used the male pronoun. A sudden loneliness gripped my lungs. I rinsed the suds off my fingers. But what had I expected—that she could read my mind? At least, I thought, we could share our outrage.

It’s not his fault, I said. But he’s born into that family, and he’s in it forever.

Born into this world, Theresa mumbled to her laptop.

What? I said.

The world, she said. It’s fucking ending. It feels crazy to me now. Why anyone would have a baby.

I turned off the faucet. What do you mean? I said.

With everything that’s going on, she said. It just feels unethical to bring a kid into all of it.

Unethical, I said slowly. Hasn’t it always been unethical?

Huh?

If we’re bringing ethics into it—the world has kind of always been shit. So hasn’t it always been unethical?

Well, she said, it seems worse now. Doesn’t it?

My chest went cold.

I scooped cat food out of a can and distributed it into two bowls. I did everything. Cooked, cleaned, fed. Everything. Birthday Boy polished his bowl off and moved toward Sugar Baby’s, which he always did, and I stood at the ready to stop him.

Let her eat, you little asshole, I said.

But Sugar Baby wasn’t eating. She just sat there and cocked her head to the side.

Had I hurt her? Was she mad at me?

I reached out a trembling hand, and she backed away, her golden eyes blazing in black fur. *You can be scary sometimes.* I leaned in and squinted into the slits, like pitch-black keyholes, widening outward under my shadow. On the other side was a great fear, tomorrow’s tragedies piled up like corpses behind the door, blocking all light. A great fear, and powerlessness, and death. No future.

I was the scared one. *I* was.

I hit myself on the forehead with my fist hard enough that I saw fireworks behind my closed eyes. Then I looked just in time to see Sugar Baby’s tail disappear beneath the bed. Birthday Boy sauntered over and began to eat out of her bowl.

No! I said.

It must have been pretty loud, because behind me, Theresa yelped.

I pushed Birthday Boy away. He blinked. Theresa said something, but I didn’t hear. I stood. I grabbed at my pounding head and stomped to the kitchen. There were still dishes left. It never ended. A plate broke in the sink.

Stop! Theresa said.

The patter of kittens’ feet through the apartment. They were so loud. Something crashed. Somebody was crying—a baby.

I held a clean glass in my hand. It shattered on the ground.

Stop it, Theresa said. Please.

Things jumped loudly from the sink. Forks and spoons and knives and glasses and plates rang out against the tile, clattered and clanged and burst into clouds of brilliant, glittering noise.

Then something cut me on the thumb and I took the very first breath of my life.

It was silent for a long time. The kittens had stopped. The baby had stopped. The music downstairs had stopped. My thumbnail was a lunette of blood. At my feet, eggs of quivering white soap clung to silver nests of cutlery strewn with broken glass and ceramic. I turned. Theresa had backed up against the wall. Her cheeks shined. Her eyes were huge black coins. I had to look away. Out the window, I thought I could see a lavender tulle dress, tossed blonde hair, the heel of a pink sneaker disappearing around a distant corner.

I stuck my thumb into my mouth. The coppery tang of blood brought me back to myself.

I’m sorry, I said.

Theresa didn’t respond.

The kittens advanced into the kitchen to inspect the wreckage. I shooed them away and went to grab the broom. I missed the music; I wanted it back. I wanted it all back. I felt sick.

I’m sorry, I said again. I wasn’t being myself.

She just stood there, next to the window, looking down at the table. Her palms were pressed into the wall. The only sound was the glass clattering into the dustbin. Still no music. Outside the sidewalk was empty. Disaster, invisible, paced the streets. Extinction made faces against the window. Apocalypse crouched at the door, checking its watch.

I deposited the glass in the garbage and went to grab the mop. Theresa would understand, I told myself. She would understand. The man who’d just done that—that wasn’t me. And once I cleaned up after that man, he would be gone forever. Soon I would say the right things; we would embrace each other and cry; and then, holding hands, we would walk toward the frantic, throbbing music of our unknown future.

With the mop I traced shining arcs over the hardwood. I wrung it out into the bucket. Next door, the baby let out a couple of muffled, hiccupping cries. I waited for the music to start back up. I waited, and listened.

A moment later, there was a knock at the door.