

## NEIGHBOR JONES

If the conditions are right and there are no clouds in the summer sky, Jones' dining room is filled with a strange astral glow, like the shimmering of oil on water. Jones' wife marks the appearance of this late afternoon aurora by pouring herself three fingers of Scotch, which she sips while circling the small dining room with a wistful look in her eyes.

The queer light show occurs when the sun reflects off the windshield of the dilapidated bus parked behind neighbor Smith's house. Jones, who teaches high school trigonometry, once calculated the necessary angle of deflection for the sun's rays to glint off the windshield and illuminate the room where his wife now stands sipping Scotch.

Years ago, they'd dressed formally for dinner then made passionate love on the floor as the dancing light filled the room. But that was years ago, lifetimes ago. Now Jones keeps himself busy with projects around the house and waits for his wife's summer melancholy to pass.

"I'm going to call the police and see if they can't make Smith haul that heap away," he says, passing through the dining room with a three-eighths-inch, variable speed reversible drill in his hand.

"Don't be an ass," his wife responds coldly.

It is silent for a moment and Jones thinks that he hardly knows his wife. Then, as though

someone has thrown a switch, the room is no longer filled with the light.

In the bedroom Jones watches his wife remove her bra, watches her sagging breasts sway as she slips off her panties and tugs a bathing suit over her fleshy ass. Neither Jones nor his wife acknowledges the other, though Jones is aroused for a reason he could not fully put into words if he were asked to.

He stands at the window and watches his wife climb the steps to the terrace. She throws a towel on a battered lounge chair, then dives into the pool. Further up the hill, Smith's bus sits rusting, illuminated by the orangey light of the setting sun.

Standing there, he feels stupid for having threatened to call the police. He feels empty living in a house that has never rung with children's voices. He wonders if their decision not to have kids was a mistake. It is too late now. They're too old, though not as old as Smith and his wife next door, both bent over by grief and osteoporosis and time.

Smith bought the bus decades ago when his daughter was first born. He thought it would make a nice playhouse for her once she'd grown older. They had their child late in life. Mrs. Smith had nearly died in childbirth. They said their daughter was a blessing from heaven. But as heaven bestows blessings, it just as arbitrarily extinguishes them. The girl never lived long enough to enjoy her playhouse.

Jones' wife swims laps in the pool as he pads about the house. Still holding the drill, he turns on the lights in every room. He runs his hand over the Formica counter top he installed in the kitchen, examines the built-in bookcases in the living room, scrutinizes the detail work on the buffet he put in the dining room. He sees only the flaws in his workmanship—places where he should have used glue instead of nails, joints that could have been better mitered, cracks in the wood where he should have drilled pilot holes before driving screws. Where others praise his handiwork, he sees only the imperfections, the shortcomings of his efforts.

Tugging open the screen door that always sticks, Jones' wife pauses to allow her eyes adjust to the light. She watches him stare at the crown molding in the dining room, then goes into the kitchen and pours two more glasses of Scotch.

Outside, neighbor Smith strolls up the hill, a martini in hand. Jones' wife returns to the dining room, the ice cubes gently clinking about the glasses. Jones takes the Scotch, staring out the door, watching his neighbor stand motionless before the bus. His wife hugs him from behind, her arm clutching him about the chest, her chin pressed to his shoulder. He can feel her moist bathing suit against his shirt, her breasts pressing against his back, and he puts his hand on her arm.

In his back yard, Smith visibly sighs, his shoulders hunched. He throws back the remainder of his martini, then turns toward his house, stopping in the middle of his yard to look up at the celestial void. As though pleading to the faint stars that have begun to shine in the bruised blue sky, he raises one arm to the heavens. His eyes turn to Jones' house blazing with

light that pours from every window then trudges back to his house.

Jones drinks deeply from his glass then kisses his wife's hand. "Put that stupid drill away," she whispers, and he drops it, turning to her. She smiles sadly. As he eases the strap of her bathing suit from her shoulder, she whispers, "oh love, love." Jones doesn't even think to close the blinds or put out the lights, because he does not care. And the world spins away as he loses himself inside his trembling wife.