

Neighbourly Love

Bradley Stoke



Cissy Fox strode aggressively along the sidewalk toward her front gate, swinging her handbag. She pretended not to notice her neighbour, Peggy Roth, who was weeding the flower beds, and kept her attention focused on the *For Sale* sign the realtor had erected on the front yard.

The *For Sale* sign would never have been there were it not for Peggy Roth. If the neighbours had been more tolerable, she and her husband would never have contemplated moving at all. Leastwise, not so soon after having moved in. Cissy snatched some letters and a copy of the *New York Times* out of the mail box, slammed shut its lid, and continued her stride up the front walk. She concentrated her gaze on the newspaper photograph of President Truman shaking hands with one of Uncle Joe Stalin's comrades. She was glad that at least some things were still normal.

When Cissy and her husband, Ken, moved into the house not that many months ago, she was naturally nervous. It wasn't just the concern of what it would be like after those years of separation while her husband served his country in Europe and became one of the most handsomely decorated Negroes in the nation's armed forces. Cissy recognised that the causes of Liberty and Democracy came ahead of her desire for her husband to be by her side during those difficult months of pregnancy. A time that culminated in little Eleanor's birth (named after the wife of the president she and her husband so much admired).

She knew that Negroes, even ones as well educated as Ken and Cissy, would not necessarily be welcomed in a white neighbourhood. But she and Ken had ideals, liberal ideals, fostered and encouraged by the example of the late president. When

Ken got offered the appointment at the Hospital, he immediately accepted it. And this was despite it being a more junior role than would have been offered a white man with the same educational achievements and less well-decorated in defence of the flag.

“There’s only one way that the white men in our great nation can come to accept the Negro, Cissy,” he told her, “and that is for us coloured folk to show that we are just as able to succeed as they are.”

So, on the day they moved in, it was with a certain amount of trepidation that Cissy and Ken first knocked on their neighbours’ doors to introduce themselves. They were aware that their presence had been well noted from the stares they attracted as they stood by and supervised their possessions being heaved out of the delivery van.

However, it was not Cissy’s fears about racial prejudice that were ultimately to be their main vexation, although originally it was very much the greatest source of their anxiety.

In fact, it seemed that Peggy and Aaron Roth couldn’t have been less prejudiced if they tried. Aaron shook Ken’s hand so warmly, immediately broaching the subject that had remained unspoken but always present when they had introduced themselves to Herbert and Nelly Wood, their other neighbours.

“Gee! It’s great to have a Negro couple move next door. We’re Jews, you know. And I can only give thanks that our parents emigrated from Europe when they did, otherwise, well, you read the news...”

“I visited one of the camps, myself,” Ken remarked. “I saw the ovens and the corpses. We’d never believed it possible.”

“Gee! I guess none of us did.”

Cissy was delighted by their chat with Peggy and Aaron. She lingered for half an hour, drinking beer on their neighbours' porch while Ken told anecdotes about his service in Europe. Cissy never tired of his stories. How he captured those four German soldiers. How he prevented some American soldiers looting a German house. How the soldiers under his command had secured several key military targets, taking advantage of their skin colour for night-time reconnaissance. How he was treated like a freak in England, where people had never seen a black man before. And, of course, though this Ken didn't mention, of their belief that a black man's penis was larger than a white man's. Not something Cissy could ever vouch for, having never got to know a white man so intimately, but she was sure happy with all nine inches of what Ken had to offer.

But Cissy had to take care of little Eleanor, so she left Ken chatting with Aaron and Peggy. She was happy then, as she would not be now, for her husband to be out of her sight.

She could see that Peggy was, relatively speaking, quite a forward woman. But Cissy wasn't that sure of the ways of white folk, especially Jewish white folk, who she heard were especially liberal and open. Like Cissy, Peggy was a woman in her late twenties. Unlike Cissy, she wore her blouse cut just so low, her bosom pushed up just so high and her arms were bare from her shoulder to her bracelet-adorned wrist. And the make-up! Was it necessary for a white woman to wear such thick layers? Her eyes were blue and startling. And the red of her lipstick made her lips seem as big as those of a Negro woman such as herself.

Nevertheless, despite her good Christian faith, Cissy was of the general

opinion that white and black folks just didn't mix. That forwardness in her smile to Ken and the way she rested her hand on his arm just that little more lingeringly than Cissy ever would on a stranger, this was just the odd way white folks, particularly Jewish white folks, behaved. Perhaps the God of Moses and David was a more permissive God than the one she worshipped?

There was something strangely evasive about Ken when he finally arrived home, ever so slightly tipsy after having imbibed rather more than the half glass of beer that Cissy had permitted herself. His kiss on her cheek was somehow curt and perfunctory. And he buried himself in the newspaper crossword rather sooner than normal, with the radio broadcasting that bebop jazz that had been such a revelation to him when he returned to America.

It was only later, when they lay in bed together, that Ken became more relaxed. Cissy was pleased that he was, if anything, rather more amorous than usual, although she hoped that the cries of their passionate lovemaking wouldn't awaken little Eleanor. Cissy stroked Ken's limp penis as it flopped between his thighs, admiring its distinctly darker hue.

"You seem troubled, love," Cissy remarked.

"It's nothing."

"Nothing? I can read you like a book. I can see it's not nothing. Is it the neighbours?"

Ken looked alarmed.

"Neighbours? What's this about the neighbours? Should I be troubled? What are you saying?"

“When we visited Mr and Mrs Wood, and Mrs Wood said ‘nigger’...”

Ken looked suddenly relieved.

“Oh that! You get used to being called a ‘nigger’ in the Army, dear. It’s nothing. Nothing at all!”

Cissy was right to be perturbed though. And it wasn’t the Woods’ unthinking prejudice as she discovered a short while later when she returned home unexpectedly. She had taken Eleanor to the nursery and found that she wasn’t needed, after all, at the clinic where she worked most mornings. It was when she got home she discovered the real cause for Ken’s strangeness that evening. And for his continued evasiveness the days following.

Perhaps Cissy should have been warned by the grunting, panting sound she heard when she pushed open the front door. She hadn’t expected anyone to be home. Ken should be working at the Hospital, so perhaps there was something wrong with the plumbing. Or maybe it was the call of one of those strange birds that live further out West. What she didn’t expect to see, when she pushed open the bedroom door, was her bed, or more exactly the bed she shared with her husband, occupied by not one, but two bodies, and that only one of those bodies was black.

“Kenneth Fox! What *are* you doing?” Cissy shouted, relieved that her anger gave her a voice that she would otherwise have lost in shame and disgust.

For there it was, as she adjusted her gaze to the unfamiliar sight, two people making love. In fact, and she hated the sound of the very word, let alone the actual sight of it, they were *fucking*. And one of those people, the one whose penis was thrusting in and out of the blatantly displayed vagina, was none other than her

husband.

Ken turned round his head, startled and ashamed, but the white woman underneath, who Cissy could now determine was Peggy, gripped him tightly to her bosom, holding him so that he couldn't easily escape.

"Gee! Hello, Cissy! We didn't expect to see you here!" she said, through short panting breaths, stubbornly gripping her legs around Ken's buttocks.

"I don't care what you expected. Get your hands off my husband!"

"Are you asking me to stop in the middle of a perfectly good fuck, Mrs Fox? Have you any idea how impertinent and rude that is? How would you like it if I were to come over while you were making love and forced you apart from your husband?"

"What? Sorry. What are you saying?" wondered a suddenly flustered Cissy.

Peggy gripped Ken to her breasts, Cissy's husband curiously uncertain as to what he should do, which bothered Cissy rather more than she imagined. In all the portrayals of this scene she'd ever imagined, or read about, or seen hinted in the movies, the discovered guilty parties separated instantly, guilty and ashamed, while the moral high ground was occupied by the wronged and affronted spouse.

"Your husband and I have just been making love. And very good at it, he is too! You are a very lucky woman, Mrs Fox. And now you come in, while we're in the middle of our lovemaking, and it seems that not only have you no intention of participating, which would be the polite way of extending your affection toward your husband in the thralls of his passion, but it seems you want us to stop."

"Well, of course! Ken is my husband. You can't do... you can't... what you're doing is..."

“I know exactly what I’m doing, Mrs Fox. And if you don’t mind I would rather your husband and I continued our lovemaking as we were before you rudely interrupted us!”

Just for a moment, Cissy hesitated. Should she just say that it was all right, that they should continue as they were while she went downstairs to prepare a pot of tea?

Of course not!

“Get off my husband now!” Cissy yelled, tugging Ken by his shoulders and pulling him apart, even while his penis was still inside Mrs Roth’s vagina. It plopped out as Ken fell back and jumped onto his feet, looking much more like the guilty party that Cissy imagined a discovered man should.

“Oh! That’s just fine, that is!” exclaimed Peggy, who knelt up on the sheets, naked and sweating, her hair shaken loose and an aggrieved expression on her face. “So, whatever your husband and I would like to do, whether we’ve already begun or not, whether we are right in the middle of what we are doing, being passionate and everything, all that is irrelevant to you!”

“Well, yes it is, Mrs Roth!” Cissy replied. “And if you don’t mind I would much prefer it if you left my house now. I don’t want to see you near my husband ever again!”

“Well, Mrs Fox! I can see that I’m no longer welcome. Though it is obvious to me that had you not come home I could still be having a very pleasant time with your husband.”

With that, Peggy gathered her clothes, put them on angrily, and strode out of the house. Cissy remained with her husband who now looked more frightened than he

probably ever did in the war in Europe, even in that battle for which he was most highly commended.

It was not for several days, perhaps more than a week, until Cissy would again allow her husband to share the marital bed. And even then, she was reluctant to express anything to Ken that might suggest that she had pardoned him for his role in committing adultery, which a woman who loved him less and was altogether less forgiving would never have contemplated.

But was her forgiveness expressed too soon? Although Cissy no longer acknowledged her neighbour, she assumed this lapse of behaviour was just an aberration and she felt quite sorry for Mr Roth who appeared altogether oblivious to his wife's gross infidelity.

And then one afternoon, after a tiring morning in the clinic, neatly folding her nurse's uniform ready to place on a hanger in the wardrobe, she heard the tinkle of the door-bell. Cissy hurriedly slipped on a dress and shoes, and scampered down the stairs to the porch where she saw not only Aaron Roth, but also his wife, Peggy. What could this be about? Perhaps Mr Roth had discovered his wife's unfaithfulness and wished to discuss it further with the other wronged party.

"I hope you don't mind the two of us visiting, Mrs Fox," Aaron said, when Cissy had opened the door, anxious that her dress didn't look too much like it had been pulled on in a hurry. "But Peggy told me that you would probably not welcome her if she came by herself."

"After the way you spoke to me last time," Peggy said with a conciliatory smile, "and the way you've not said anything to me since, I thought it best I asked my

husband to accompany me.”

“I see,” remarked Cissy, who hadn’t forgiven Peggy one iota. Indeed, the enormity of the event had become even greater in her mind. How could the slut even dare to walk up the front walk? “I dare say you haven’t forgotten the circumstances in which we last met.”

“You must confess you were totally unreasonable,” Peggy remarked.

As Cissy spluttered, unsure of how to respond to this fresh effrontery, Aaron put a calming hand on his wife’s bare shoulder. “You must forgive my wife. Peggy’s never really understood other folks’ views on matters of neighbourly affection. We hope you can overcome your petulance and accept Peggy’s difference of opinion. However, what we’ve come to do is return your husband’s watch which he left behind when he last visited.”

“Ken’s watch?” wondered Cissy, taking into her hand the quite valuable pocket watch Aaron proffered her. This was the very one that was engraved with that declaration of love and fidelity that Ken had said on many occasions, through all the trials of war, was all between him and despair in the darkest early days of the Normandy landings. “How did he come to leave it with you? What was he doing that he could have lost it?”

Peggy smiled, with Aaron’s affectionate arm around her waist. “Oh, you know, Cissy. The normal....”

“The what?” asked a suddenly irate Cissy.

“You know, what two people do together when they enjoy the pleasure of their mutual company,” Peggy continued.

Cissy leaned back against the door jamb. There was Peggy, with her husband clearly totally unperturbed, his arm still around her waist and his grin if anything more affectionate and broad. This needed clarification. Surely, she had misheard things.

“Are you saying that in your home, you and my husband...?”

“Well, you did say that I should never enter your house again!”

“That’s not the point!”

“Don’t be angry, Mrs Fox,” Aaron remarked kindly. “Peggy is very clean. She has regular check-ups and I can assure you that if there was the slightest risk of an infection...”

“Infection! My husband!”

Cissy felt a rumbling stir within her breast and thunder inside her.

“No one could ask for a better lover than your husband, Mrs Fox,” said Peggy, as if the confession of intimate knowledge of this fact would somehow lessen the pain and anger that Cissy felt.

“Leave now! Just go away! Leave!” yelled Cissy, angrily slamming the door in front of her as she backed into her house.

And then she collapsed onto the floor, the door closed behind her, the view ahead of her being the hallway and the staircase leading to the bedroom, and burst into angry and loud sobs. Her chest heaved up and down with humiliation and disgust, while she clasped the pocket watch in her hands on her lap. Her eyes returned again and again to the words engraved there. It had been chosen with so much love in those days just before her hastily married husband climbed up that long narrow ramp onto the troop-carrier that she hoped, with so much fervour that it hurt, would not be victim

to a torpedo from one of Hitler's U-boats.

The happiness on Ken's face when he returned home, bearing a record by Dizzy Gillespie that he'd managed to buy at the drug store, was soon dispelled when Cissy confronted him with the news of her latest revelation of his deceit.

Ken was once again a stranger to the connubial bed, his sleeping head once more pressed against the sofa arm. He was again denied any semblance of civilised conversation with the wife who presented him with the watch whose loss he'd assumed had taken place in the Hospital surgery.

It was then, of course, that Cissy first raised the subject of the two of them leaving their new home, simply to get away from the neighbours. This was not, as they once feared, as a consequence of the racial prejudice that they had experienced in so many small and slighting ways, but from a greater degree of affection between the races than the Lord Jesus had ever intended when he bade his children to love one another.

The issue of the sometimes bitter, and always protracted, arguments between husband and wife was not resolved. Despite her anger at the Roths, Cissy quite liked her new home and the amenities in this pleasant part of town. And Ken, himself, promised that all that which had happened between him and Peggy was over. He assured Cissy that he had been taken in, seduced, in fact, by the promise of easy love that the Roths offered. Their attitudes toward free love and extramarital sex were indeed very exciting and very tempting. Could Cissy blame him, a man who had seen so much horror in the battlefields of Europe and had seen the German women selling themselves so cheap?

“Do not pursue this discussion one word further!” Cissy warned her husband.

“The war is over. Mr and Mrs Roth are perverts. What they do is their business. We are God-fearing folk and we do not, repeat, do not behave that way ourselves!”

Were that always so true! The final straw, which led to the realtor being summoned, the sales board being erected and Ken being banished from the family home until the property was sold, occurred not long after.

Naturally, Cissy no longer trusted her husband. Who would? Her husband, like all men, was a weak creature, easily misled by a Jewish temptress, like Peggy Roth. In her darker moments Cissy almost wished she had been turned into soap like the other unfortunates in the Polish concentration camps, the horror of which was still in the newspapers.

It was a day when she knew that her husband believed for sure that she was working in the clinic, it being a Tuesday, one of the busier days. He should be at home, after a long shift in the Hospital, recovering after all those operations he’d performed, some of which on victims of war on whom only now was it necessary to perform the life-saving surgery. On this day, little Eleanor safely deposited in the nursery, Cissy made her way home, deliberately choosing to come in through the back yard gate.

It was as she feared, after she pushed open the kitchen door, quietly and sneakily. Her husband was not in. He was not lying in bed, recovering from the lack of sleep, brought about by having to make do on the uncomfortable couch. He was not in the living room, playing those Charlie Parker or Louis Armstrong records on the new electric gramophone he’d bought with such pride. He was not in the kitchen, fixing

himself a peanut butter sandwich.

So, if he wasn't home, where was he?

Cissy knew, of course.

Her anger exceeded the limits of her politeness and the constraints of neighbourly propriety. She strode over the low picket fence that divided the Roths' lawn from their own, and headed not to the front door, where she might be confronted only by excuses, but to the kitchen door, which like her own, was open to the back yard. She eased the door open, needing only to be concerned about whether it should need oiling, rather than whether it should be locked.

She stood in the Roths' kitchen, her heart thumping in excited anger, as she breathed in deep in an attempt to calm herself.

She knew what needed to be done. She could quite distinctly hear the sounds of lovemaking from where she was. And although she'd only ever once before heard the sound of a mature couple fucking (and such despicable behaviour didn't deserve a more polite term), so often had she rehearsed that first discovery in her memory that there was no mistaking it now for something else.

She made her way stealthily up the carpeted staircase, each tread taking her closer to the grunts and cries and gasps that indicated that sexual intercourse was proceeding in the upstairs bedroom.

She placed her hand on the handle to the bedroom door.

She hesitated whether she should lower it and enter the room. After all, it was possible that it was just Peggy with her husband, Aaron. However much she despised the two of them for their bestial behaviour and their lack of respect for Christian

values, it would be a humiliation too far for her to discover not her husband in embarrassing circumstances, but instead Peggy and Aaron Roth indulging in what was wholly permissible after they had exchanged their marriage vows.

When she heard an unfamiliar male grunt, that had that slightly nasal sound she associated with Aaron and his Brooklyn Jewish accent, Cissy was on the verge of retreating. And then she heard the grunts of a man's voice, which even though it wasn't in the usual close proximity that Cissy normally heard, was undeniably that of her husband.

Cissy pushed open the door, her entry speech prepared and ready to fire.

"And so this is the faithfulness you promised me so many times..." Cissy began, her voice at first high and assertive, and then fading to nothing as the true horror of what she was witnessing became clear.

Yes. There was Peggy. And yes, there was Ken, as Cissy had guessed, his penis deep inside her. But not inside her vagina, but within the other hole, the orifice designed not to receive but only to give, and only what had previously been eaten.

And also, which shocked her even more, beneath Peggy's outstretched arms, and the crouched body that was being buggered so vigorously by Ken, was the form of Aaron, hairy chest and equally erect penis, deep inside Peggy's vagina.

And as if the three of them were not enough, there was a girl, perhaps only a teenager, whose mouth was on Ken's mouth and whose hands were stroking Peggy's nipples with a lasciviousness that no woman should feel for another woman.

Although outnumbered, Cissy pushed apart the fucking couples, enduring the indignation from Aaron, Peggy and, most of all, this other girl, who was more

concerned that she be paid for the services she provided. She pushed her husband as hastily as she could out of the bedroom, allowing him only the time to grab his clothes, which she only let him put on again once they were well clear.

“Have you no idea how very rude you are, Mrs Fox!” Peggy shouted down the staircase at the retreating couple. “How would you like to have a cock pulled out your ass like that?”

“I expected to be paid for a double fuck and a double fuck is what I’ll be paid for, whether I get it or not!” shouted the girl, standing naked at the top of the stairs, except for a white bra that covered her small breasts.

“Mrs Fox! Could you not at least wait until we had finished?” pleaded Mr Roth, whose arm was around this strange girl, and which intimacy went wholly unremarked by his wife.

And so that was that! Cissy couldn’t trust her husband to be within sight of the Roths. From now on, his every movement was suspect and Cissy ensured that there was a telephone in the doctor’s surgery where he now slept on a camp bed purchased precisely for that purpose. And Cissy made sure that she telephoned her husband as often as she could to check that he hadn’t yet again chosen to run back into the arms of that slutty Peggy Roth.

And as Cissy eased close the front door behind her, she sighed as she surveyed the house that once she’d loved so much but now hated so deeply.

And then the telephone rang.

Cissy jumped up. It was what she lived for now. It was either her husband, once again meekly and sorrowfully attempting to make good a hurt that only the

patience of the Lord could make better. Or, and this she hoped for more, a realtor with the promise of a showing.