

ANALYSIS

“Neighbors” (1976)

Raymond Carver

(1938-1988)

“Raymond Carver is not concerned with the privileged, self-conscious upper-middle class of the big city and its suburbs. His characters live in small cities and towns, teach high school, guard banks, wait on tables. They are not particularly witty or insightful. Carver writes about ordinary people in ordinary situations, the Silent Majority of Middle America. And yet after finishing a Carver story, we feel the deep chill and the menace of modern life.

In the stories something happens to disturb the protagonist—an infidelity is acknowledged years later, a loutish husband is exposed, or in ‘Neighbors,’ a profound envy revealed. He suffers shame or guilt; feels rejected or disappointed. He doesn’t know what action to follow or even what attitude to take. Carver’s people are not self-aware enough to understand their feelings or articulate enough to discuss their lives. Although a rare Carver story ends in actual violence, usually his protagonist will simply go on with the old life. It will, of course, never be the same.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Carver has not attempted to develop a new, elaborate language for fiction. He writes in a traditional, rather laconic style. His prose is as sparse and flat as the prose of Hemingway [this misses the iceberg below the surface in Hemingway], although their characters and themes are very different, almost devoid of metaphor or simile. There are no extra words, no acrobatics. He tells us what we need to know as directly as he can—the fuzzy white spread on the bed, the tell-tale white lint on the wife’s back. Again like Hemingway, he does not dwell on psychology or spend time rummaging in the minds of his protagonists. They are what they say and what they do. Yet the reader understands them, their sense of inadequacy, the violence just below the surface.

Herein lies Carver’s enormous skill. Speech and gesture are so exactly right that the small detail reveals the large meaning. In ‘Neighbors,’ when Bill reaches ‘in back for the bottle of Chivas Regal,’ we know that he has watched with envy as Jim hid the bottle. When he looks at the door across the hall and immediately says to Arlene, ‘Let’s go to bed,’ we understand the excitement he feels at the prospect of changing lives with the Stones. In the hands of this writer, less *is* more.

‘Neighbors’ is a typical Carver story. Envy and mild discontent lead decent, unexceptional people into a disturbing self-awareness. As they adopt the good life of their neighbors, changes occur in their own relationship. They become at once more secretive and more sexual. Disaster ensues. Yet the ending is ambiguous. Caught in the corridor between the two apartments, are they now excluded from both? Or are they more united? We don’t know what will now happen—will the Millers call a locksmith?—but that is irrelevant. The important thing has already occurred: they share an awful truth about themselves. It is awful, and yet ordinary, human, perhaps inevitable. There but for the grace of God go I. Like Chekhov, Carver writes stories that are small in scope and large in the truths they reveal.”

Wilfred Stone, Nancy Huddleston Packer, Robert Hoopes, eds.
The Short Story: An Introduction
(McGraw-Hill 1976, 1983) 506