

Old Friends

M C Neuffer

Wednesday meant coffee and crullers. Cups and confectionaries held by pairs of translucent-skinned hands—brown spotted, blue-veined—extending from long-sleeved, still serviceable coats. Clothing hung too big on their waning bodies; sheets draped over furniture in soon-to-be-vacant homes. The men, long ago competitors, longer time friends, occupied their usual window table in a café across from Washington Park Square in lower Manhattan.

“Peters, I want to write something scandalous.” Reynolds’ weak vibrato barely reached across the table, absorbed in the too-thick clothing of his tablemate—too heavy for the season. They call each other by last names, a professional holdover, but old protocols remain.

“Why? I’d think you’d be satisfied resting on your laurels.”

Reynolds scoffed. “Have you ever seen a laurel bush? They’re all sharp-edged leaves and snappy twigs. Nothing you’d want to rest on.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it. Why something scandalous?”

Reynolds sipped, wetting his throat, and returned his cup to the table. “Umm, well, I suppose just to see if it can still be done. The last hurrah, so to speak.”

“I hate to let you down, but it’s being done all the time.”

“When, Peters? When was the last time any author published something of that nature?”

“Journalists do it all the time. Just read the news.”

“That’s not a proper scandal. It’s titillation, plain and simple. Voyeuristic titillation for the masses. No lasting power, all fluff and candy. No meat. No grizzle. And don’t ever equate real writers with journalists. You know better.”

“There have been books lately that—”

Reynolds waved away the comment. “I know the ones you mean. Those are compiled shit-scrapings from the news, salted with unsubstantiated hearsay. Gossip, repeatings of those with grudges.

“Well, pick a topic. Give it a whirl, old friend.”

“That’s the hard part. People don’t care, don’t read. Nothing makes any sort of magnificent, lasting splash. Nothing rises above the edge. Nothing soaks you.” Reynolds’ voice rose, though not with sufficient power to concern other patrons. “Can you think of any vice or crime that draws more than marginal outrage for longer than a few days? I want to write something that outlasts this century.”

Peters leaned in. “How can I help?”

“We need a word processor to start with.”

Peters felt sympathy for his friend and a bit for himself. Both had been left behind by technology, mental legs too weak to sustain the necessary sprint to keep up. “I think they call

them computers now." Peters' cup rattled on the saucer. Tremors of age. "I have a nephew."

Other ears heard their conversation. Other eyes watched, knew their names, downloaded their books, placed them in literary memory blocks, and needed their project to succeed.

"See you next Wednesday?" asked Peters.

"Unless I'm dead," said Reynolds. "Or if you're dead. In that case, it would be kind of you to send me a telegram."

Apartment 5B

"When was the last time I visited your place, Reynolds? Open a window, for God's sake. It stinks of old man and book dust in here. Have you a cat I don't know about?"

Peters' apartment was in the same building, three flights up. They'd purchased them fifty-seven years ago, during the real estate crash, during their prime writing days, back when their publicists encouraged and abetted their professional feuds.

Reynolds pushed a stack of old periodicals from its perch, yielding Peters a place to sit, swatting the seat cushion with a magazine, fanning away the dust caught in streams of light from an arched reading lamp.

"A woman comes by once a month." Reynolds was terse, perfunctory in his speech. For him, facts spoke for themselves; no need for amplification. Peters leaned toward the verbose in conversations and in his writings.

“Well, if you do, you’re paying her too much. What’s her name?”

Peters raised his hands in a stop gesture. “Oh, no. You’re not stealing her from me like you did my idea about—”

“Now, don’t bring that up. That was over forty years ago. Besides, my publisher, who just happened to be yours, gave me the idea. You have my permission to drive a knife in his back whenever you please. I’ll lend you one of mine. He cheated me more than once, you know.”

Reynolds whispered, “I think he’s dead.”

“Serves him right. Has the computer arrived?”

Reynolds jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

“In those boxes. Bought the whole kit your nephew recommended. It wasn’t cheap.”

“I’ll give Steven a call. He may have time this weekend to set it up.”

“As long as I don’t have to buy anything more.”

“Did you get a printer?”

“Yes, I told you, the whole kit.”

“I don’t think they call them kits.”

“Tea?”

“Yes, thank you. No sugar.”

“I know you don’t take sugar, Peters. My memory isn’t as bad as yours.”

“Mine is just fine. As a matter of fact, I distinctly remember seeing a new neighbor moving in two days ago on your floor.” Wistfully Peters’ bushy eyebrows raised. “Quite a young looker that one, mid-twenties, I’d say. If I was only forty years younger—”

“You’d still be twenty years too old for her.”

“Perhaps, but I do remember the days authors got more respect and admiration from the young set, why I also remember you having that tryst with those twins.”

“They weren’t twins. Stop regressing. It’s not good for your constitution or your heart. Are you still taking your medications?”

“Yes, but not the green ones. They give me gas.”

Knock, knock... knock.

The men looked at each other. “Expecting someone?” Peters asked.

“No, are you?”

“Why would I be expecting someone at your apartment? Go see who it is.”

Reynolds slipped into his house shoes, then pushed from his chair with age-required grunts and exhalations. Trundling to the door, he tried to pick up his feet, not shuffle. His doctor said it was good for him to lift his knees. At the door, he didn’t look through the peep-hole. It seemed to have risen higher on the door over the years. He pushed the door lever down—a change from a standard knob, more comfortable to open.

A young lady stood facing him, feet together, hands laced in front, head slightly tilted. He wondered how young women could stay balanced and not topple over with their feet glued together like that.

“If you’re selling something, I don’t want it.”

Smiling, the creature stated, “Oh, no, sir. I’m not selling anything. I’m your new neighbor. Across the hall?”

Reynolds knew the last bit was an informational statement, not a question. Rising inflections at the end of declarative, spoken sentences drove him to thoughts of corrective violence...if he had the energy.

“Well, come in, I suppose. Peters, we have company.”

“I can see that. I heard the knock. Shut the door and get out of her way. She’s a lot nicer to look at than you.”

“Hi, I’m Holiday,” she said with a youthful vigor both men envied. “I have a teensy, tiny favor to ask. You see, the movers packed up my phone and, before I knew it, loaded it on the truck. I’ve been going through boxes all day looking for it. There’s no telling what they stuck it in. I need to call Daddy to let him know I’m all settled in. Could I borrow your phone?”

“It’s not long distance, is it?” Reynolds asked.

Peters’ lips parted, dropped in a scowl. “No such thing anymore, Reynolds. You don’t get charged by the call or pay more for those out of your area code.” Peters stood when Holiday entered the room. Younger men neglected such chivalrous actions.

“Phone, phone, phone,” muttered Reynolds. “It’s here somewhere.” He moved to his desk, then pushed aside this and that.

“Here, use mine. My name is Peters. I live three floors up. Saw you moving in. Would have been impolite to bother you then, to welcome you to the building, you know.”

Taking the offered cell phone, Holiday launched into a soliloquy Fitzgerald would have been proud of: “Thank you so much! I didn’t think moving would be so difficult, you know, getting the utilities switched over, mail forwarded, learning where the trash goes—it took me until yesterday to find the laundry room, then I found a washer and dryer in one of my closets, behind a stack of boxes.” As she talked, her eyes wandered about the apartment. She paced a few steps this way and that. “I don’t start my job until Monday, so I have plenty of time to settle in. Does either of you cook? I’m more of a takeout person myself. We always had a cook. Wow, look at all those books! Have you read them all?”

“I told you, I don’t live here, but I’ve written a few of those, in fact—”

“You’re a writer? That’s so cool. I don’t read much myself, now that I’m out of school—no need to, really. Everything you want to know or everything worth knowing is online. Just a few clicks away. I’m *still* waiting for the cable guy to hook me up. Do you have cable? They told me the building was wired with fiber optics. Bet you get blazing speed from that. Our main house is so far out. Daddy has a special satellite dish, one

normal people can't get. Have you had any problems with the elevators? Don't worry about noise from my place. I'm strictly a go-there for parties sort. Mess up someone else's place, I say."

Reynolds had been pantomiming a flagman for the last fifteen seconds to get her attention. He finally stepped in front of her. "My dear, you seem to have forgotten your purpose."

"My purpose?"

Peters helped, pointing to the phone in her hand. "Your father. I believe you were going to call him?"

"Oh, Daddy! Yes, call Daddy. Do I have to dial a number for an outside line here?"

Strange question, Peters thought. "No, just the area code and number will suffice. Swipe right. It's not locked."

Holiday swiped; the tip of her tongue poked the corner of her mouth as she dialed. "Hi, is Daddy home? I'll wait." Holding a hand over the microphone spot, she rolled her eyes, whispering to the men, "Daddy never answers the phone. He doesn't even have his own cell. He uses the car phone or the chauffeur's cell when he's out. Hi Daddy. Yes, everything's cool here. Looks like they delivered everything. No, no problems. In fact, I met two very nice elderly neighbors. One of them is a writer. Can you believe it? Monday, I start Monday. I told you that before I left. Get Martin to put it on your calendar."

Being gentlemen, the pair turned away, not wanting to overhear her conversation. With backs turned and hearing less

sensitive by age, they didn't catch the next sentence or see the change in her expression. "Yes. The computer arrived. I'm looking at the boxes right now."

Turning back, she gave them a cheerful, "Thank you guys SO much. If I can ever do anything for you, let me know. I'm telecommuting, so I'll be in most of the day. You don't know any delicious, unattached young men willing to show a girl around town, do you? No? Well, back to my chores. Still unpacking, you know." She swiveled, nicely so in the estimation of the gentlemen, then stepped to the door, closing it behind her.

"You're right, Reynolds. Forty years ago, I would have been too old."

The number Holiday dialed was a drop—a voice mailbox with a west coast area code. It had been a necessarily placed call, a sham conversation over the cell waves, a live number in case Peters looked at his phone later. Holiday's partner had been listening from the apartment across the hall. His questions came to her by other means.

Apartment 5C

"That went well. The boxes had the blue X? Each of them?"

"Yes. Honestly, Jubilee, I don't know why you need me, why you brought me to this time, made me inhabit this body."

"You don't like it? I think it suits the mission. I conducted a lot of research before selecting your flesh. I picked the name

you use in this time too. Holiday sounds festive. In any case, you're the key that unlocks doors we may need opened, my dear. In this here, in this now, pretty young women are given access to places where I wouldn't be welcome. It's a two-person job to fix the discontinuity between our time and theirs. If we let it linger, havoc will ensue"

"You're being overly dramatic. Time wrinkles are left unattended all the time. And don't start talking to me like I'm a brainless blonde. I'm no more a pretty girl than you or that lamp over there. And I won't stand for you pimping me out to get information."

"No mating will be required. A simple smile and intimated possibilities are all that will be necessary. Until we're done, I'll treat you like my tender-aged niece. The mirror must be maintained, strengthened, my dear. Pretense, to be effective, needs constant attention to detail. It could all fall apart if you slip out of character, even for a moment."

"So, you're just going to sit inside, tending and twisting the fun parts, feeding their computer, while I have to interact with people, the noise and smells?"

"Holiday, it would not be helpful if your neighbors saw me coming and going from your apartment. You know that. Besides, you have often expressed desire to be an operative. Take it. Run with it ... Be it."

"Stop. I said I would. Do we need anything from ... out there?"

“Yes, a few things. I’ve made a list.”

“You want me to go out there, shopping in person? Why not order online and have those things delivered?”

“We don’t want anything traced here, so a shopping trip is in order. Here’s the list. Remember, cash transactions. Electronic banking only for the lease, utilities, and such. Normal recurring expenses. No trails leading to or from this place. Read the rule book. And don’t forget to shift your appearance out there. These people have cameras everywhere.”

“Hand me the list.”

“He’s coming up. Time to stage.”

“Jubilee, I’m cold. Can’t I wear more clothes?”

“No. These males like the sight of long legs. Pull your hair back a bit, behind your ears. Okay, get out there.”

Holiday stepped into the hallway, a canvas grocery bag clutched in each arm, purse slung across her shoulder: a nicely tanned and rounded bare shoulder. Closing her door, she waited. The dance began as the elevator door opened.

“Do you need some help?” he asked.

“Umm, yes, it seems so. Could you hold one of my bags while I get my keys?”

“Certainly, glad to help.”

Fishing in her purse, looking into his eyes, she baited the hook. "I just moved in. Are you a tenant?"

"No, uh, visiting my uncle, or rather a friend of his. He lives in 5B ... Your neighbor, Mr. Reynolds."

Mustering a programmed, chipper voice, she poured out, "Oh, I met him two days ago! Is your uncle named Peters? I met him too. They were so sweet to me."

"Yes, Miss...?"

"Holiday. My name is Holiday. Yours?"

"Steven. Steve Peters."

"Oh, dear. I can't find my keys. I know I put them in here before I went shopping. I'm sorry. I don't know what to do now."

"It's all right. The building super can let you in. Here, give me the other bag. We'll call him from Reynolds' apartment."

"Oh, thank you. I didn't know they held a spare set downstairs."

Ten steps to the door of 5B, ten steps to set the hook, ten steps releasing pheromones.

Apartment 5B

Prompted by a knock, Reynolds opened the door.

“Well, Steven, glad you could make it, and I see you have a young lady in tow. My new neighbor, if memory serves. You work quite fast, young man.”

Steven felt a blush rising. Reynolds and his uncle, when paired up, had no social filters on their mouths—a hobby to see if their words could shock the unaware.

“She’s locked out. Needs to call the super. I just happened to be—”

“Yes, yes, come in, come in. Your uncle is in the living room. We’ve cleared some space for you to set up the rig.”

Steven, Holiday trailing, strode to the inner sanctum. He’d been here a few times, never felt comfortable in this overstuffed, under-structured mess. He preferred chrome and steel, minimalist styles in living spaces. Setting the bags on the kitchen counter, Steven turned, admiring the length of the large-eyed female standing a few feet away.

“Mr. Reynolds, do you have the super’s number handy?”

Peters mumbled, “Steven, he won’t find it in this junk. Here use my phone. Look under S in the contacts. Young lady, can I get you a drink?”

“If it’s not too much trouble. I’ve been out shopping and could use a glass of water.”

“Ice?”

“Yes, please ... Just a bit.”

“I’ll bring it to the living room. Perhaps you can leverage a few words out of Reynolds. I know he has some in there somewhere.”

“The little girl’s room is...?”

“Down the hall, on the right.”

Reynolds attempted a shout. “Peters, have her use the one in my bedroom. The other has boxes in it.”

“Thank you, I won’t be long.” The three men watched as she moved away; two silently reminisced, and one made plans.

Holiday opened the medicine cabinet, counted pill bottles, recorded the labels, toothpaste brands, ointments, and sundry items, and sent the data to shared memory blocks. One minute and thirty seconds later, she returned to the living room, accepted the glass of water, and received the expected news.

“Looks like the super can’t open your door for another two hours. Running some errands. Said he’d call when he’s on his way.”

“Can I wait here, Steven?” Holiday knew men liked to hear their names spoken.

“I don’t see why not. I’ll be here for a while, setting up a computer.”

“You know how to do that? I don’t have a clue how all that stuff works.”

“Well, it’s simple, really. Just plug everything together and power it up. Would you like me to show you how?”

“Yes, I’d love to watch. The cable guy was nice enough to set mine up yesterday. He was so sweet, helping me like that.”

“I’ll bet he was,” Steven said dryly, not seeing the parallels. That’s good, Holiday noted.

Steven unboxed, staged, and plugged up with Holiday less than an inch away from his every move, seeming fascinated, asking questions, occasionally placing her hand on his arm. Was that a squeeze, or was she just maintaining her balance? Steven didn’t care. He slowed his progress. Finally, Steven rose from underneath the desk.

“All that’s left is to power up, then let it run the initial program installations.” Looking away from Holiday’s face, a hard thing for him to do, Steven asked, “Mr. Reynolds, did you get the package with Office already installed?”

“I have no idea. I ordered what you had on the list.”

“Good, then not much to do but wait while everything initializes in the register.” Steven plotted, pretended to muse. “You know, rather than sit here, Holiday, would you like to get a bite to eat? There’s a nice Italian place just down the street. I haven’t had lunch yet.”

“I’d like that. I’ve had absolutely *NO* time to explore the neighborhood, with all the shopping and unpacking.”

“Uncle, we’re leaving for lunch.”

Pointing, Peters asked, "Is this thing ready? Anything we need to do?"

"Ah, well, there is, but it's easy. Just sit in front of the screen and press yes when prompted. We'll be back in about an hour. Let me know if the super calls while we're out."

Three months later

Jubilee and Holiday looked out the window facing the street. The fire trucks were gone leaving wet street pavement glistening in the early morning. One squad car remained, and city workers removed what little debris the thermite bomb left behind. The taxi was a slag heap, melted into the asphalt.

"Another successful mission. Well done, Holiday, well done. Gala made a clean getaway from the driver's seat. He even mugged for the street camera, wearing that street hood's face.

It was a struggle to keep them alive, past their due date, long enough for them to finish the project. Getting their corpses to zombie walk past the building superintendent and into the cab was touch and go, but we needed a witness and street video conformation since their bodies turned to ash in the conflagration."

"So, you get to go back while I stay here?"

"Just for the remainder of the lease, less than a year. It would raise too many questions if their new neighbor left

abruptly. We must ensure future time lines back up with the past, so I need to get their brain engrams in storage for transfer upline. They start to go bad after a week.”

“What am I supposed to do about Steven?”

“Just keep him in the friend zone. He’ll tire soon enough. They all do.”

The police questioned Holiday, labeling her a Daddy-money rich girl who didn’t know anything. After they left, an expected knock sounded at her door.

“I’m so sorry, Steven. Come in. What happened? The police asked me all sorts of questions Had I seen anyone new around lately? Someone who looked out of place? Any suspicious visitors?”

“It was a hit,” Steven said. “Someone had them killed. A car doesn’t just melt like that”

He fell back on the couch, one he’d spent many hours riding in vain attempts to implement his seduction techniques, never getting past the cuddling stage, never breaking past the *we need to know each other better* barrier. Together, they’d watched hours of nature shows she liked so much.

Steven rubbed his face, leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “They’d been working on a manuscript, sent me a final draft two days ago by email—a political -exposé of sorts. Had some very deep sources feeding them.”

Steven stared at the ceiling. "Connections between weapons and drug trade, the mobs, and influential politicians. Everything is perfectly documented. Reference notes, original documents, recordings of phone conversations, and photos. I haven't told the cops yet. I gave the whole thing to their publisher. Afraid to hang on to it, and I'm still nervous. Mr. Goldstein called it a hot property ... wants to rush it to print while their names are still in the news."

"Do you think the police will find clues on their computer?"

"The cops told me it's missing, along with every scrap of paper in both apartments."

Holiday sent her memory tendrils forward in time. Was saddened Steven's life would end next week. She considered having pity sex with him, disgusting as that would be.