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Good Neighbor

By

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In Shadow Lake, the American dream is dead.

The small neighborhood in western Portia, Ohio truly feels like a place forgotten by the world. Hundreds of underpaid workers made the commute to the Hooper Horseradish factory every morning, and each night they return, reeking of vinegar and fragrant spices. Their homes reflected their aching bones, creaking loudly each night in a chorus of unrest. Families scraped together every last dollar to make ends meet, so the only stores nearby were a run-down Kroger fused with a run-down K-Mart. Both opened in 1990. Both closed in 1990.

On the sunnier eastern side of Portia stands the idyllic and unchanging streets of Good Neighbor, a tribute to the height of suburbia and the nuclear family. Picturesque houses lined the perfectly paved asphalt, birds sang in the perpetual gentle breeze that rustled the canopy created by rows of beautiful and robust trees, and each lawn was

manicured with such accuracy that it looked like turf. Beautiful fathers leave for a plethora of enviable jobs, while their beautiful wives stay in their beautiful houses and take care of their beautiful children. Any type of food, shopping, or recreation you could possibly wish for could be found within ten miles of the neighborhood.

I should say now that I was one of those Shadow Lake kids.

It was a genuinely miserable place to live, but I would never say I had a bad childhood. I didn't have any friends growing up, but my mom and dad went above and beyond their limits to make sure their little Rose was always happy. Dad put in extra hours at the factory every Christmas to buy me my favorite punk band t-shirts, and Mom never hesitated to order pizza and dye my hair whenever I was having a rough day.

I *was* one of those Shadow Lake kids. Past tense. One day Dad came home absolutely beaming with news of a promotion and a signing bonus large enough to put a down payment on a home in Good Neighbor.

It was a beautiful two-bedroom farmhouse style home that sat way at the end of the cul-de-sac on Elm Street. As soon as the moving truck pulled in, dozens of neighbors came out of their homes to offer gifts and help us carry furniture. It was a bit overwhelming at first, but we all eventually warmed up to their kindness.

The first to arrive was Mrs. Beesly, who owned the house directly to our left. She came over with an earth-toned green bean casserole that I had very little interest in, but it seemed to wow my parents. Mrs. Beesly was the head of the PTA at Portia Public High School and was the spitting image of suburban excellency. She had perfect skin,

impossibly bouncy hair, fantastic yet subtle fashion choices, and her voice sounded like silk flowing across a harp.

From the house to our right came Mr. Tim Martin and Mrs. Patty Martin. Mr. Martin was a firefighter, so he insisted on helping my dad carry our new TV into the house. Mrs. Martin brought us a basket of seasonal vegetables from her home garden. The mother from the home across the street, Mrs. Young, eventually came over as well. She was a stay-at-home mom with five children, so she couldn't stay for long, but she brought my mom an entire book full of her grandmother's recipes.

After everything was said and done, Mrs. Beesly invited my family over for a small block party she was throwing that evening. I wasn't exactly a party person, but my parents seemed so infatuated with all the new attention they were getting. I decided to go for their sake.

It was at that party that Carson Beesly gave me his proposition.

I felt pretty conflicted when the most infamous student from Portia Public High School asked me to join his little troublemaking friend group. Carson was well known by Shadow Lake and Good Neighbor students alike for being a force of chaos. Given his mother's role as the head of the PTA, he realized at a pretty young age that he was virtually untouchable.

Freshman year he decided to really put that theory to the test. One day after school, a crowd of students packed themselves around the school's paper and cardboard recycling dumpster as plumes of smoke danced into the sky. Standing in front of the

flaming dumpster with a matchbook in hand was Carson and his two closest friends, Devin Long and Rachel Yorkshire. Just as he'd predicted, the school wrote the incident off as a freak accident caused by unexpected light refraction. After the fire, his group became known as the "Firestarters", and their displays of mischief only got more intense as our high school career continued. From sneaking a dozen goats into school to sneaking a dozen bathroom stall doors *out* of school, the Firestarters mastered the art of getting away with anything.

"Whaddya say?" Carson asked. He had shaggy black hair, and his eyes were an earthy green. His skin was perfect, and his face was almost annoyingly symmetrical. I looked around his room as I thought of an answer. The walls were plastered with posters of half nude rockstars and three-quarter nude supermodels, and a pile of dirty clothes sat in the corner. Truly the spitting image of luxury.

"Surely there's a catch," I said. "You three have been thick as thieves for three years now, why the change?" I crossed my arms.

"No catch," he said. "It's just nobody's been able to pass our initiation."

"Initiation?" I asked. "I'll bite."

Carson nodded toward Devin. The younger boy's black hair shined in the light as he bent down and started digging through his bookbag. Eventually he pulled out a small slip of paper and handed it to me. I unfolded it and read it in my head.

The GAUNTLET

The following tasks must be completed in a single night.

1.) Steal a chicken from Mr. Gordon

2.) Vandalize the Portia Public High School Gym

3.) Pull the fire alarm

“Isn’t literally all of this stuff illegal?” I asked.

“It’ll be fine,” Carson cooed.

“Seriously dude, your mom has an in with the school, not the cops,” I said. “You really think you can get away with this shit?”

“I don’t *think* we can get away with it,” he replied. “I can guarantee it.”

I looked at Devin and Rachel. Their eyes were eager and alluring. Back in Shadow Lake making friends was never my strong suit, but when my parents encouraged me to find some friends in the neighborhood, I highly doubt this is what they had in mind.

But these were the *Firestarters*, the jester kings of Portia Public High School.

“Would I have to do it alone?” I asked.

“Nope!” Rachel jumped in. “We’d be with you every step!”

“You all seem... excited,” I said.

“It’s not often we get someone with an actual chance of succeeding,” Devin said.

“I haven’t even said yes yet,” I said.

“Then please, tell us your answer,” Carson replied.

I paused for a moment.

“Yes,” I said.

The next night I was standing in the middle of Mr. Gordon's field with my hand tightly clasped around a small key. In front of me stood a silent chicken coop locked with a massive shiny padlock. Carson said Mrs. Beesly apparently loved these chickens as much as Mr. Gordon did, visiting multiple times a week to check in on them and look for new eggs. After a while Mr. Gordon made a copy of the chicken coop key and gave it to her, what luck.

I looked back to see the Firestarters sitting in Carson's 1991 red Camaro. They all gave me thumbs up and big smiles through the windows. Mr. Gordon's house was only a few hundred feet away, and I kept cautiously peering at his windows to see if a light came on.

Finally, my trembling hand slowly inserted Mrs. Beesly's key into the lock and twisted. I closed my hand around the lock in a fist to try and muffle the click of the latch opening, but it rang through the dead air like the world's largest pin drop. Before I could even reach for the door handle, a swarm of newly awakened chickens slammed into the door and overwhelmed me to the ground.

I heard the Firestarters jump out of the car and rush to help me. All I saw whenever I tried to open my eyes was an ocean of feathers. After a few moments I felt an arm grab my shoulders and hoist me up.

"Are you alright?" Carson said in a half whisper.

I nodded.

"Good," he said. "Grab a chicken."

In my haze I entirely forgot the purpose of opening the chicken coop in the first place. I scrambled to grab one of the many chickens sprinting away from me, but they were all far too fast. All but one, that is.

In the center of the field, directly next to the chicken coop, stood a very large chicken. Rather than running for its life, it seemed very preoccupied trying to eat a large rock. I slowly approached the chicken. It didn't even seem to notice me, still pecking vigorously at its treasure.

I leaped forward and scooped it into my arms, being extra careful not to hurt it. It immediately stopped moving, and for a moment I worried I may have somehow instantly killed it. Instead, after a few seconds, it decided I was its new rock, and it started lightly pecking at my bicep.

I lightly pet the feathers on its head.

"You know what?" I said to Carson. "This guy isn't so- "

Mr. Gordon's front door opened.

"What the *fuck* is going on out here?" he screamed. Mr. Gordon was a big man, both in height and mass. He nearly had to duck to walk through his front door, and his years of plowing the fields definitely gave him quite the large physique.

That being said, I was not concerned about his muscles. I was concerned about the hunting rifle in his hands.

"Damn coyotes," he said, raising the gun to his shoulder.

“Oh shit!” Carson said. He had already broken into a full-blown sprint, and I decided it would be smart to do the same.

A gunshot rang out through the air, narrowly missing Carson’s leg, and landing in the dirt. As soon as he reached the fence, Carson quickly jumped over it and turned around to help me.

“Give me the chicken!” he said. I quickly tossed him the bird and did my best to climb over the fence as fast as possible, but my attempt was nowhere near as graceful as Carson’s. Another gunshot rang out, this time getting embedded into the wood of the fence. Rachel threw the car door open for us. Carson dived in first, landing partially in Rachel’s lap. I followed shortly behind, jumping into the passenger side, and slamming the door shut. Devin pushed the gas pedal to the floor, and we screeched down the old country road.

I could still hear my heart throbbing in my ears, but the others had already started celebrating.

“Let’s fucking *go* Rose!” Devin cheered. He gave me a friendly punch on the shoulder. “That was awesome!”

“He tried to kill us!” I replied.

“He was trying to kill coyotes,” Carson said.

“He thought *we* were coyotes!” I said. “I think I’m out, this shit’s too crazy for me.”

“Come on,” Carson said from the backseat. “That was the hardest part. From here on out it’s smooth sailing. Plus, look at the bright side. We made a new friend!”

Carson held out the chicken and sat it on the center console. Immediately it jumped back into my arms and started pecking me again. There was something about the way Carson refused to be phased by anything, as if the world could end around him and he would still go out with a nonchalant comment and a smile.

Getting chased off someone’s property with a rifle wasn’t exactly how I thought my life in Good Neighbor would start, but it was admittedly kind of a punk rock dream of mine. I always figured it would be motivated by me sneaking through the window of some preacher’s daughter, but stealing a chicken would have to suffice.

“Should we name it?” I asked. I gently pet the chicken’s head.

“I don’t know if that’s the best-“ Carson started.

“I want to name it Peck,” I said. “I’ll stay if we can name it Peck.”

“Peck it is!” Carson said.

The rest of the short car ride was largely spent discussing the plan for the school gym.

“Each one of us is going to take one of these.” Carson motioned to a grocery bag full of red spray paint cans. “As soon as we get into the gym, each person needs to choose a corner.” Carson pulled a small piece of paper out of his pocket with a strange rune-like symbol. “Draw this on the floor.”

“This seems like very specific vandalism,” I said.

“It’s just to scare them,” he replied. “They get so wigged out by this satanic shit.”

“Oh shit!” Devin yelled. He slammed on the breaks, and we all shot forward.

Luckily, I was wearing my seatbelt, but I felt Rachel slam into the seat behind me.

“Are you okay?” I asked. Devin quickly grabbed my arm.

“Shh!” He put his finger against his lips. His eyes didn’t move from the road in front of us. I looked out the windshield.

Mr. Martin, the firefighter who helped my dad move our TV, stood entirely still mere feet from the front of the car. He was staring directly at us, with a big grin stretched across his face.

“Oh shit,” I said. “It’s Mr. Martin.” I looked back at Carson, but his eyes were wide open staring out the windshield. “Shit, he’s definitely going to tell our parents.” I put my head into my hands. “I’m so fucked.”

Suddenly the car lurched forward, like a massive weight had just come down on it. I looked back up to see Mr. Martin slamming his fist onto the hood of the car. Somehow his fist had made a massive dent in the metal.

“What the-“ Before I could finish his fist slammed down again. This time the windshield shattered. I quickly shielded my face from the glass. When I moved my arms again, Mr. Martin was already lunging toward us.

“Now, Devin!” Carson screamed. Devin slammed his foot onto the gas pedal and barreled into Mr. Martin.

Mr. Martin went flying into the air, luckily missing the open windshield by mere inches. His body fell to the ground behind us with a resounding thud. Devin didn't slow down.

"What are you doing?" I yelled. "We have to go back and see if he's alright."

"Go back?" Devin replied. "He'll kill us!"

"He'll be fine," Carson said. "We need to get to the school."

"The school?" I screamed. "We just killed Mr. Martin and you're worried about the school?"

"Look what he did to the car!" Carson replied. "You seriously think that was Mr. Martin?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I'll explain when we get to the school," he said.

It was hard to hear anything over the deafening wind blowing through the windshield, so the rest of the ride was spent in silence.

After a few minutes, Devin peeled into the Portia Public High School parking lot. Carson jumped out of the car and sprinted to the front entrance, the rest of the group following closely behind. He dug around in his pocket for another key, also likely stolen from Mrs. Beesly, and unlocked the double doors.

I'm not sure why, but I always felt an overwhelming sense of dread whenever I was in the school after dark. Something about the empty hallways and complete lack of light seemed to scream that I shouldn't be here, that I didn't belong. We pushed on.

Eventually, we swung open the large wooden doors of the gymnasium. Thanks to the generous donations from some of Good Neighbor's finest, the school gymnasium was massive. One wall had floor to ceiling posters celebrating championship wins and athletes of the year, and the other was a massive window looking out into the rolling hills and beautiful fields that surrounded the school. The moon sat high in the sky and illuminated the gym through the window with a ghostly pale light.

I put Peck on the ground. It immediately walked over to the window and tried walking through it. As expected, it bonked its head on the glass. It paused for a moment and tried again.

"Here." Carson handed me a can of spray paint. Rachel and Devin had already started painting the corners of the gym.

"What the hell attacked us out there?" I asked.

Carson sighed.

"There's no good way to tell you this, but the Gauntlet isn't really an initiation," he said.

"What?" I asked. "Is this some hazing bullshit?" I shoved the can of paint back into his hands. "You'll probably pin all this on me too, huh? Is that how you get away with so much?"

"Let me finish, Rose," he said. "I don't get away with this shit because my mom is the head of the PTA or because the cops like her or anything like that. Let me show you

something.” Carson took off his shoe and pulled up the sole, revealing a small polaroid inside. He took it out and showed it to me.

There was a young boy, clearly a smaller Carson, and two parents, a mother, and a father. The mother looked nothing like Mrs. Beesly. Her hair was short and straight, and she wore an ugly sweater and khakis.

“I don’t remember much from being a kid,” he said. “But I remember that face.” He pointed to the woman. “That’s my mother.”

“What are you talking about?” I said.

“I remember being a little kid when Mrs. Beesly came to Good Neighbor. She lived across the street from us. Single woman, no kids, seemed like an odd choice for a middle-class suburb. Nobody really thought twice once she started coming door to door offering her homemade green bean casserole as a gift. They all ate it, said it was delicious, the best they’d ever had. The next day it had already started. Everybody in town acted like caricatures, like extras in a movie. They brought Mrs. Beesly gifts of jewelry, delicacies, and money. One family, under whatever batshit mind control she put them under, even gave her their only son.” Carson put the photo back into the shoe. “My real name is Carson Langston. Whatever the hell calls itself Mrs. Beesly is not human, and it has been holding this entire town hostage for over a decade, holding *me* hostage. A long time ago I realized I was too close to her to make a change, but I could help someone else do it for us. That’s what the Gauntlet is for. Step one is to distract her, she

loves those chickens. Step two is to set up a banishment ritual. Step three is to draw her right into our trap.”

“You’re messing with me,” I said, not entirely sure if I believed that myself.

“You saw Mr. Martin,” Carson replied. “They’re *all* like that. She’s in their heads. Something in that goddamn casserole.”

In the casserole? I thought. *Oh god...*

A knock pounded on the gym door.

“Rose,” a voice cooed.

A chill went down my spine. The voice was so clear, so familiar. It was unmistakable. It was my mother.

“It’s me sweetie,” it sang. “Please let me in. You’re not in trouble. I just want to see you. I just want to see you. I just want to see you.” Like a broken record, the voice repeated the phrase over and over, each time punctuating with a resounding knock.

“We have to finish,” Carson said. “Now.”

Rachel had already finished her corner and moved to another, so I sprinted to the final free corner. Carson sat in the middle of the gym and began drawing a massive sigil with a pentagram. The knocking got louder and louder. I studied the slip of paper with the rune carefully and did my best to recreate it.

Suddenly, the wooden door cracked. I turned to see a fist pounding *through* the door. The wood splintered and creaked until it had been entirely broken off of its hinges.

My mother stood in the doorway; a painted grin stretched across her face. She looked unreal, even uncanny. She immediately locked eyes with me. I looked back at the rune on the ground. I still had a few more lines to draw.

“Rose, run!” Rachel screamed. I looked up and saw my mother sprinting toward me. I dropped the can and made a break for the exit on the opposite side of the gym. I threw open the metal doors and bolted into the hall. I checked my right, *all clear*. I checked my left, *shit*.

Mrs. Martin and Mrs. Young stood at the end of the hall, silhouetted by the moon shining through a window. I could only identify them by their sing-songy voices.

“Come now, Rose,” they said. “Be good. Let’s take you home.”

I sprinted to the right. I turned a corner and looked for a classroom to duck into. I tried every door I could find, but they were all locked. I made it to the end of the hallway without any luck. I turned another corner only to find myself at a dead end.

Heavy footsteps began approaching from behind me. My heart stopped. I slowly turned around. My bastardized father stood mere dozens of feet behind me, smiling.

“You’ve had a busy day, haven’t you honey?” he asked.

There was no way out. My dad wasn’t massive, but he was still definitely twice my size and would be nearly impossible to outmaneuver in this hallway. Plus, if he was anything like Mr. Martin, I could be in trouble.

“Hey asshole!” A voice screamed from the other end of the hallway, behind my father. A textbook flew through the air and landed on his head. He stumbled, but the

smile never left his face. He quickly turned around to search for the culprit, and I took my chance to sprint back in the direction of the gym.

Mrs. Young and Mrs. Martin seemed to be making rounds through the hallways, so I quietly sneaked behind them until I arrived back at the gym doors. I peeked through the tiny windows to see if the coast was clear. Luckily there was no sign of my mother or any other adults. Unluckily, there was also no sign of the Firestarters. I had to hope that textbook throwing angel was an indication they were alright.

I slowly opened the door and slipped into the gymnasium. I quietly jogged back to my can of spray paint and started the final touches to my rune.

Three more lines.

One.

Two.

As I started the final line, my spray can sputtered and wheezed. I could tell it was still full of paint, but something was blocking the nozzle. I tried slamming it against my palm, cleaning it off with my shirt, even hitting it on the ground, but nothing worked. I started looking around for another can, but while I was distracted with my can, something had snuck into the gym.

Mrs. Beesly stood in the doorway that once housed the wooden door. Her smile didn't look as forced as the others, it seemed genuine.

"Oh, Rose." Mrs. Beesly shook her head as she took a few steps forward. "I should have warned you that my son is a bit of a bad influence." She continued forward.

“You don’t really want to do this, do you? Look how much good I do for this town.

Without me, Good Neighbor would just be another Shadow Lake. You of all people know how miserable that would be.” Mrs. Beesly’s voice was hypnotic, almost trance-like. I felt the urge to run away screaming fade from my body. I wanted to stay right here, with her.

“You’re feeling it, aren’t you?” she asked. “It’s peaceful, isn’t it? Happy?” Before I knew it, Mrs. Beesly was right in front of me. She held a small piece of green-bean casserole to my lips. I started to open my mouth.

“Rose, no!” a voice called from the doorway. A force slammed into the side of my head and sent me tumbling to the ground. Immediately fear surged through my body, knocking me out of whatever state Mrs. Beesly was trying to put me in. I looked down to see my assailant, another textbook.

Carson sprinted over to us from the doorway, a bundle of textbooks in his hands.

“You idiot,” Mrs. Beesly scowled. She whipped her head toward Carson and sprinted over to him. As she ran, her body began to shake and swell. Masses of muscle and organic tissue began to burst through her dress. Her blonde hair erupted into a red flame and her face seemed to melt and singe. By the time she intercepted Carson, she was double her size and lost all humanoid form. She was a pile of meat and viscera with an ever-glowing flame on her head.

Carson threw more books at her, but they bounced off without a scratch. He tried to run around her, but she was everywhere. Finally, a grotesque appendage formed from

her body and grabbed Carson in a death grip, seemingly squeezing the air out of his lungs.

“Do you know how hard I worked for this?” the mass screeched. “Humans are easy to persuade but to *control*? I had to perfect my formula on those chickens before I could even touch a human!” The mass slowly rotated so the “face” was looking at me. “I am their *god*! I am their creator! They are nothing without me!”

I felt a small pinch on my calf. I looked down. Peck was standing next to me, going to town on my leg with his beak. Apparently, it had hit its head on the window so many times that it began to bleed. The chicken’s scalp was already soaked in blood, but it didn’t seem to mind.

Suddenly I had a somewhat disturbing idea.

I picked up Peck, and before the mass could react, bent down, and used the chicken’s head as a paintbrush to draw the final line.

As soon as the rune had been completed, the room erupted in light. The sigil in the center of the room had disappeared and was replaced with a swirling pit of bright red flames. An unseen force seemed to be pulling the mass closer to the hole.

“You fool!” it screamed. “You have no idea what you’ve done! The price you will pay!” As pieces of the grotesque blob started to be consumed by the flames, it let out a wail of horrendous pain. The appendage dropped Carson to the ground and started trying to pull itself out of the vortex, but to no avail. Within seconds, the entire beast had been consumed and the sigil closed.

I ran over to Carson and checked his pulse. He was alive.

Devin and Rachel ran in from the hallway.

“What happened?” Rachel asked.

“We were trying to stall out there, we heard screaming,” Devin said. “Is Carson okay?”

I nodded.

“We’ve got him,” Rachel said. “Go check on your parents.”

My parents! I ran into the hall and called out for them.

“Mom?” I yelled. “Dad?”

They came rushing down the hallway, no longer grinning.

“Oh my god, Rose!” They both threw their arms around me.

“I’m so sorry,” my mom said. “I was so scared. I couldn’t control myself.”

“I know mom, it’s okay,” I replied.

“I would never hurt you,” my dad said, tears streaming from his eyes.

I hugged them tightly.

I felt a slight pain on the back of my leg. I turned around to see Peck, still covered in blood, staring at me. The chicken opened its mouth, and to my surprise, a human voice came out.

“You may have killed one of my many bodies, but the blood spilled has allowed me to inherit a new form!” Mrs. Beesly’s voice called out from the chicken’s beak. “In this new puppet I will rise again from the ashes like an infernal phoenix!”

Rachel quietly approached the chicken from behind with a large storage container from the gymnasium's storage closet. She quickly flipped it onto the chicken and sat on it.

“Hey!” Mrs. Beesly's voice was muffled from within the plastic container. “Let me out! So help me I'll... I'll...” There was a pause before a muffled furious pecking sound began.

In Good Neighbor, the American nightmare was finally dead.