

THE IDEA

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An excerpt from

"Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?"

We'd finished supper and I'd been at the kitchen table with the light out for the last hour, watching. If he was going to do it tonight, it was time, past time. I hadn't seen him in three nights. But tonight the bedroom shade was up over there and the light burning.

I had a feeling tonight.

Then I saw him. He opened the screen and walked out onto his back porch wearing a T-shirt and something like Bermuda shorts or a swimsuit. He looked around once and hopped off the porch into the shadows and began to move along the side of the house. He was fast. If I hadn't been watching, I wouldn't have seen him. He stopped in front of the lighted window and looked in.

"Vern," I called. "Vern, hurry up! He's out there. You'd better hurry!"

Vern was in the living room reading his paper with the TV going. I heard him throw down the paper.

"Don't let him see you!" Vern said. "Don't get up too close to the window!"

Vern always says that: Don't get up too close. Vern's a little embarrassed about watching, I think. But I know he enjoys it. He's said so.

"He can't see us with the light out." It's what I always say. This has been going on for three months. Since September 3, to be exact. Anyway, that's the first night I

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saw him over there. I don't know how long it was going on before that.

I almost got on the phone to the sheriff that night, until I recognized who it was out there. It took Vern to explain it to me. Even then it took a while for it to penetrate. But since that night I've watched, and I can tell you he averages one out of every two or three nights, sometimes more. I've seen him out there when it's been raining too. In fact, if it *is* raining, you can bet on seeing him. But tonight was clear and windy. There was a moon.

We got down on our knees behind the window and Vern cleared his throat.

"Look at him," Vern said. Vern was smoking, knocking the ash into his hand when he needed. He held the cigaret away from the window when he puffed. Vern smokes all the time; there's no stopping him. He even sleeps with an ashtray three inches from his head. At night I'm awake and he wakes up and smokes.

"By God," Vern said.

"What does she have that other women don't have?" I said to Vern after a minute. We were hunkered on the floor with just our heads showing over the windowsill and were looking at a man who was standing and looking into his own bedroom window.

"That's just it," Vern said. He cleared his throat right next to my ear.

We kept watching.

I could make out something behind the curtain now. It must have been her undressing. But I couldn't see any detail. I strained my eyes. Vern was wearing his reading glasses, so he could see everything better than I could. Suddenly the curtain was drawn aside and the woman turned her back to the window.

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“What’s she doing now?” I said, knowing full well.

“By God,” Vern said.

“What’s she doing, Vern?” I said.

“She’s taking off her clothes,” Vern Said. “What do you think she’s doing?”

Then the bedroom light went out and the man started back along the side of his house. He opened the screen door and slipped inside, and a little later the rest of the lights went out.

Vern coughed, coughed again, and shook his head. I turned on the light. Vern just sat there on his knees. Then he got to his feet and lighted a cigaret.

“Someday I’m going to tell that trash what I think of her,” I said and looked at Vern.

Vern laughed sort of.

“I mean it,” I said. “I’ll see her in the market someday and I’ll tell her to her face.”

“I wouldn’t do that. What the hell would you do that for?” Vern said.

But I could tell he didn’t think I was serious. He frowned and looked at his nails. He rolled his tongue in his mouth and narrowed his eyes like he does when he’s concentrating. Then his expression changed and he scratched his chin. “You wouldn’t do anything like that,” he said.

“You’ll see,” I said.

“Shit,” Vern said.

I followed him into the living room. We were jumpy. It gets us like that.

“You wait.” I said.

Vern ground his cigaret out in the big ashtray. He stood beside his leather chair and looked at the TV a minute.

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“There’s never anything on,” he said. Then he said something else. He said, “Maybe he has something there.” Vern lighted another cigaret. “You don’t know.”

“Anybody comes looking in my window,” I said, “they’ll have the cops on them. Except maybe Cary Grant,” I said.

Vern shrugged.

“You don’t know,” he said.

I had an appetite. I went to the kitchen cupboard and looked, and then I opened the fridge.

“Vern, you want something to eat?” I called.

He didn’t answer. I could hear water running in the bathroom. But I thought he might want something. We get hungry this time of night. I put bread and lunch-meat on the table and I opened a can of soup. I got out crackers and peanut butter, cold meat loaf, pickles, olives, potato chips. I put everything on the table. Then I thought of the apple pie.

Vern came out in his robe and flannel pajamas. His hair was wet and slicked down over the back of his head, and he smelled of toilet water. He looked at the things on the table. He said, “What about a bowl of corn flakes with brown sugar?” Then he sat down and spread his paper out to the side of his plate.

We ate our snack. The ashtray filled up with olive pits and his butts.

When he’d finished, Vern grinned and said, “What’s that good smell?”

I went to the oven and took out the two pieces of apple pie topped with melted cheese.

“That looks fine.” Vern said.

In a little while, he said, “I can’t eat any more. I’m going to bed.”

“I’m coming too,” I said. “I’ll clear this table.”

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I was scraping plates into the garbage can when I saw the ants. I looked closer. They came from somewhere beneath the pipes under the sink, a steady stream of them, up one side of the can and down the other, coming and going. I found the spray in one of the drawers and sprayed the outside and the inside of the garbage can, and I sprayed as far back under the sink as I could reach. Then I washed my hands and took a last look around the kitchen.

Vern was asleep. He was snoring. He'd wake up in a few hours, go to the bathroom, and smoke. The little TV at the foot of the bed was on, but the picture was rolling.

I'd wanted to tell Vern about the ants.

I took my own time getting ready for bed, fixed the picture, and crawled in. Vern made the noises he does in his sleep.

I watched for a while, but it was a talk show and I don't like talk shows. I started thinking about the ants again.

Pretty soon I imagined them all over the house. I wondered if I should wake Vern and tell him I was having a bad dream. Instead, I got up and went for the can of spray. I looked under the sink again. But there was no ants left. I turned on every light in the house until I had the house blazing.

I kept spraying.

Finally I raised the shade in the kitchen and looked out. It was late. The wind blew and I heard branches snap.

"That trash," I said. "The idea!"

I used even worse language, things I can't repeat.