

148 2007



148  new contrast

a heartrending foghorn to dissipate the dawn
 a Tretchikoff sunset to incinerate the sea
 naked fear to fondle the small of your stomach
 a full moon rising like a sob over the rooftop

a footpath out of the suburb

David Cornwell

Good Neighbour

Seeing as though I'm out of work, and I do nothing with my free time, it made sense for Dirk to speak to me about joining Good Neighbour.

Dirk used to be a policeman and he started it all by himself, and he was proud of it. He was wearing a homemade Good Neighbour T-shirt when he came over. He put it to me like this: Me and Johnno and Bertram have the time for it, so we do it. It's a good thing to do. More people would help us also, there's good people living here. But they're busy with their jobs and they can't stay awake the whole night. So we make it our job to keep them safe. And it feels good hey. You feel good when you do it.

Since we moved down here I haven't been sleeping very well. I won't lie, it's dodgy. There's rubbish everywhere, and weeds high as your knee growing out of the pavement, and rusted cars up on bricks in some of the driveways, and houses with broken windows where you hear people shouting any time you walk past them. Sometimes at night I think I hear gunshots, and I lie there waiting for sirens but they never come. It's not like any place I've lived before, and it's the kind of area where if I was only driving through it, I'd do like my dad taught me and I'd lock the doors and roll the windows up, or down or whatever the case was, so there was only a little gap and nobody could smash them. It's definitely the kind of place where you want someone looking out for you.

Linds pretends like it's fine, and she tells me I'm paranoid, but that's because we moved here because of her. She buys and sells furniture, and this was the only area where we could afford a house big enough for that. She's doing well though, and we're lucky about that. I can't complain. I haven't earned a single rand for six months now – except I sold a pair of boots I never wore and a guitar I never learned to play, and lots of my CDs and some books that I thought I'd keep forever. It's not like I haven't looked, but you can't barman after you've worked a nice job. I tried it, I worked a whole shift, but it felt so shit and I said never again. For a while I thought I'd do like Linds did, get a hobby that could bring in some money if I was good at it. But I've never done anything like that, and it's hard to know how to start. Linds tells me not to worry about it, the money, but I tell her that's like telling rain not to be wet.

So when Dirk threw the Good Neighbour idea at me, the first thing I thought was why not. I asked him how much I would get for it and he had no idea what I meant. He was just quiet, and after a while he said You mean, like pay? He looked so confused it was impossible to admit that I asked him about money so I said I meant how much would I work. He told me about two nights a week. Then he asked me if I had a jacket that he could get his wife to stitch a patch on for me. Before I knew what I was doing, I think I was still feeling weird about the money thing, I fetched it and gave it to him. He asked me if I had a torch and I told him I had. Then he shook my hand and thanked me like I was a hero, and he said he'd make a new schedule and bring it to me when he brought me my jacket back.

He came back in half an hour with everything. He showed me the week's schedule, and gave me a copy of the patrol map. He'd drawn my route in with a pink highlighter and he told me to memorise it. He gave me back my jacket and I held it up and looked at the patch his wife had sewn onto the back. It was a bright yellow circle with a black shape in the middle. I asked him what the design was and he said it was three people holding hands but his wife had put it upside down by mistake. He tried to take it back, to fix it for me, but I told him not to worry. He gave me a list of his and Johnno's and Bertram's phone numbers and told me good luck.

My first shift was on a Wednesday, almost three weeks ago. I was

scared and I didn't do it well at all. I tried to walk the route Dirk had drawn for me, and do what seemed right, you know, shine my torch into the dark places where the streetlights don't reach, into bushes and under cars and stuff like that, but I got too scared of what could be hiding there and I ended up sitting on a corner under the brightest light in the whole neighbourhood with a rock in each hand, just in case. Even though it's June I sweated the whole night. Sometimes I'd see the steam from someone's breath coming toward me, or I'd hear their footsteps, or maybe I'd just hear dogs barking because they heard something, and I'd get up and walk back and forth along the bright strip of street just so it looked like I was doing what I was supposed to.

I wanted to go home but I knew I couldn't do that, so I spent most of the night thinking about how I was going to quit.

I had made up a big story about how I was going to start painting wildlife paintings or something, something that I could sell, but Linds told me I had to be honest. She's big into charity, and she's proud of me doing the neighbourhood watch thing and probably also just happy that it's giving me something to do. She also reminded me about something I wish now that I'd never told her about, actually I wish it never even happened – how this one time when I was lying awake worrying about noises I saw Dirk's torch shining on our curtains and it helped me fall asleep.

So the next morning I went to Dirk and told him how scared I was the whole night. He asked me what I had with me. I told him I had my torch, and I told him about the rocks I picked up. He laughed and put his hand in his jeans and pulled out a gun. A small, silver one. He told me I should carry something like that and he asked me if I wanted to hold it. I said I didn't, and I thought about the one that my dad had, that I only knew about because I found it lying at the bottom of his sock drawer while I was looking for porn. I think I was thirteen and when I picked it up it was so heavy that I dropped it, and it banged against the floor so loudly I thought it'd gone off.

Dirk told me if I wanted something to feel safe with, but I didn't want to get a gun because then I'd have to wait anyway, I should get a taser like Johnno did. I told him I thought you only got tasers in the movies and he laughed at me again. He told me there was a guy who sold them on the corner of Cilliers Road, right in the neighbourhood.

I spoke to Linds about it because I was worried it was ridiculous, you know, me buying a taser. She told me I could put it on her credit card.

The guy who sells tasers is Quinton, and he actually has a big security shop that's only about five minutes walk from our house. It's called Defence First, or First Defence, or something. It's quite impressive even if you're not into that kind of stuff. The guy has everything. I could've bought a gun from him if I wanted. He's got sixty metre coils of razorwire, alarms that work with fingerprints, and those targets you shoot at with the outline of a person covered with rings. I asked him about tasers and he put two on the counter in front of me rightaway. They were both black. I asked him what the difference was between them.

This one, he said, is a fifty model, and this one is a hundred. I asked him what that meant and he explained that he was talking about the volts. I asked him what fifty volts would do to a person, and he said fifty thousand which blew my mind. So I asked him about the other one, you know, a hundred thousand volts, what would that do to someone.

He got a funny look on his face and asked me if I was new in the neighbourhood. I told him we'd moved in at the beginning of May and he just nodded. Then he looked around the shop I think to make sure we were alone and told me he had a story for me if I hadn't heard it yet.

Apparently back in April someone had come in when the shop was full, asking about tasers. Quinton showed him the two models like he'd showed them to me and the guy said he wanted the hundred thousand. So Quinton picked it up to show him how it worked, and pretended to aim it and stuff, and then as he was handing it over so the guy could try it for himself something happened. I'm not sure how it went, I imagine maybe that the safety was off, if it even had a safety – but anyway the thing went off, discharged or whatever, right on Quinton's hand. He fucking zapped himself.

And he told me all of this very steadily and sort of with a smile on his face, but I could tell what it was for him. He had the same look my dad used to get when he told his hijack story. I saw that face millions of times growing up. I know it and I know that voice too, when it sounds like someone's reading what they're telling you off a screen inside their head. I know what that means, when their voice goes empty like that. They're talking, and you're there, but you can't say they're talking to you.

And the funny thing is you listen, I mean really listen and you can't even help it when they talk like that.

He told me he remembers seeing the shock, which he says was white like lightning, and then blacking out, out cold in a shop full of people. His shop, full of people he knew and who knew him. His neighbours. And when he woke up, the shop was empty. Everyone was gone. Nobody was around, nobody had called anyone and, how's this, he told me that he was grateful for that because when he woke up he had spit all down his front and he'd pissed himself.

He said mainly he was just happy nobody had gone through the till. Then he went and opened a cabinet behind the counter and brought out the taser. This is the one, he said. And I thought about how many times he'd done that, you know, held the thing, and remembered the flash, and remembered waking up all alone. So I bought it. He fought me about it but I made him sell it to me.

And then on my way out I had this idea, this perfect idea, and I thought for a second that even though I'd just bought the thing I'd found myself a way out of using it.

We were standing there at the till and I just started talking, about how I got retrenched and how I've been looking every day but there's just nothing for me. About how I've been living off my girlfriend for so long and how much I hate it and I don't even know why. I even told him about how bad it felt to sell beer to people ten years younger than me and about the books I had to pawn. I told him about Good Neighbour and how there couldn't be anyone worse in the world doing it, about how scared I get, and how scared I've been most of my life because of my dad and his stories and his secret gun.

I spoke in that same way he spoke to me, because I knew how to look and sound like I was lost, and I hoped he'd understand it. I asked him if he needed any help around his shop, even part-time was okay, but he said that he didn't. He said no. He said no and then he tried to sell me a beware of the dog sign. I told him I didn't have a dog and he said that didn't matter, the sign would help anyway. I told him I'd come back for it soon, but I haven't gone back to his shop yet and I hope I never have to.

I took the taser that first day I got it and I threw it down a storm drain. I kept the holster that it came with, and I make a big show of

tucking my jacket over it when I leave the house so Linds thinks I'm armed and ready. But that fucking taser's gone. It's gone and it won't zap me or anyone else ever again and that's something, at least.

I have to patrol four times a week now because Bertram's quit. How I do it is I walk the whole route in about ten minutes flat, so fast that sometimes I get a stitch, and I shine my torch around me without even looking at where the beam goes and I sing to myself to make sure that if there was anyone around they would hear me coming. I do that and then I find a driveway where I can hide and I stay there for about an hour, praying that I don't hear anything that sounds like I need to be there. Then I do the route again and I keep going like that, until I hear birds. That's when I let myself run home.

Arja Salafranca

Strangers

It was ten to six, and the sun was still hot. It would be another hour before it would go down. Around us, in the outdoor coffee shop, children played, people walked, cars reversed in the parking lot.

It was time to leave. We'd been talking barely an hour and it was time to leave.

I got out my notebook and asked Athina to write down her address and telephone numbers so we wouldn't lose touch again. I wrote my details down too, even though my email address hadn't changed in ten years, and she could have got hold of me anyway.

I looked down, of course, it was no longer Athina Karras, but Popadopolou, her married name. Athina pushed hair out of her face, dark glossy Greek hair. Did she really dye it as she had claimed all those years ago when we were twenty, twenty-one?

'It's a mousy brown,' she had said, 'so I dye it. It just looks better.'