

David Wood

THE NEW NEIGHBOUR

Tania looked idly from the kitchen window. The jacaranda tree, in full bloom, was now nearly as big as the house. Soon, she thought, it will take over the whole garden. It must be pruned back, she thought.

"Soon something will have to be done about the jacaranda," said Bill, as if he had just picked up her thoughts. "It's getting too big."

Tania did not answer. The branches and leaves of the jacaranda tree brushed noisily on the galvanised-iron roof.

She frequently did not answer Bill now, watching him shrug his shoulders and walk away. She continued washing up, dipping the plates and cups into the bright frothy suds, rinsing them under the tap and placing them neatly on the wire dishrack.

Bill had left the room and was busying himself downstairs in the garage. She saw him coming round the side of the house with the wrench, a pert green cap upon his head.

"What are you doing?" She called out, suddenly curious.

"Eh? Oh, nothing much!"

"Like what?" She scowled down at him threateningly. She hated it when he would not answer her questions precisely and clearly.

"Well, if you must know, I'm fixing the kitchen tap."

"But there's nothing wrong with the kitchen tap. I'm using it at the moment."

"Not our kitchen tap. Hers. Our new neighbour has a leaky kitchen tap. She asked me to fix it for her."

"Hasn't she got a boyfriend to do it?" queried Tania, a little annoyed that Bill was giving up his time — her time — for a new neighbour.

"I don't know," said Bill, cautiously. "At least, I'm not aware that she has. She's got a kid, though — a real brat! I think she's a single mother."

Tania scowled down at him, then withdrew her head from the window like a tortoise. Bill began to whistle. He was back in the shed now, finding the jar with the tap washers in it. There used to be hundreds in there. Now it was empty. Where had they all gone?

The lady next door was a Hungarian, in Bill's estimation a pretty good looker. She didn't scowl and actually answered you when you spoke to her. He made his way gingerly to the front door and pressed the bell.

There ensued a scuffle inside, a small yell from a child, and then silence. After a minute he could hear footsteps and the door was flung open.

The new neighbour's name was Zena.

He felt awkward standing there in his shorts and sandals, the big monkey wrench in his hand, a tap washer, scrounged from an old fitting, in his denim shirt pocket.

"Hi!" He said simply, grinning sheepishly.

"You 'ave come zen to feex ze tap? Well, zen, zank you!"

Zena sounded for all the world like a — well, Zen adept, thought Bill facetiously. Bill tugged at the lid of his cap like a schoolboy.

By this he was inside, walking down the hallway to the sink. The kitchen was as shiny as a spacecraft. Bill set to work. It took only a couple of minutes to change the washer. When he had finished she thanked him profusely.

"Would you like ze coffee? No?"

"No," said Bill, meaning all the time: "yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes!"

"Zen I am very sorry, for I 'ave none. I 'ave not been to ze shop, you zee!"

English. She was not exactly a master of it.

"If there's anything else ..." he began. "Any time!"

"Any time?" said Zena, looking at him curiously.

"Almost any time," laughed Bill, giving her a quasi-meaningful look.

"Then 'ow about tonight — at zeven?" she asked, brushing against him.

"Tonight ... tonight might be difficult," gulped Bill, sorry that he had looked so meaningful and quickly running his eye over the forbidden country. "Tonight I have to watch television. With my wife."

"Television? Yes? Wiz your wives? Then vy not breeng your wives along. She 'vould be mozt velcome!"

Bill felt defeated. Yet scanning Zena's face, he found nothing but innocence. Not even a twinkle in the eye.

Bill stumbled back home. He walked into the kitchen, but Tania was not there. He called out. She did not answer. He went out into the hallway, quickly looked into the bedroom and the bathroom, saw that the toilet door was unlocked. Then he went back into the kitchen to make a cup of tea. A small pink bottom poked out from under the kitchen table.

"Tania? Is that you?"

"Yes!"

"Why didn't you answer me? And what are you doing under the kitchen table, starkers?"

"I'm trying to catch the cat. She's got to have her needle down at the vet. I was in the shower and I heard it jump through the window. You know how hard she is to corner. She seems to know when something is wrong."

"Why didn't you answer me when I called for you?"

"Why should I?"

Bill bit back his reply. He bent down and pinched the little pink bottom.

"Ow!" Tania came out scowling, the cat clasped in the middle like a dishrag.

"Watchit, buster!" She was frowning horribly. Bill thought of his solicitous neighbour.

"I'm going out tonight," he said simply.

"Where?"

"Next door. There're more plumbing problems."

"Plumbing problems? What time are you going and for how long?"

"Seven, and for as long as it takes," said Bill, walking away.

Zena had bought coffee. She had been pleased to see him, and had not even asked him about his "wives." She had ushered him into the lounge-room and had sat him down on a plush two-seater. Then she had made the coffee and brought it in with a plate of biscuits which she had placed on a small adjacent table.

She sat down next to him. Bill glanced anxiously out the window. The jacaranda tree obscured his kitchen window, the light filtered through the lingerie-fine leaves. Tania was most likely in the kitchen, doing the washing-up, making tea. He doubted that she would be trying to peer into their next door neighbour's house — though one never could tell. He looked down at his hands. They rested on his lap, large and clumsy.

Plumbing problems. It seemed to be the only thought in his head: did she have any?

Zena smiled. This time she did not look so innocent, not by half. Her lips slid upwards in a cocky slur, her fingers, which dangled long red-painted fingernails, frisked the air.

Plumbing problems? Yes, she had them, all right: female connections, thought Bill. Tonight, Zena felt too relaxed to talk about them. She slid her hand onto Bill's knee. He could hardly breathe.

Zena looked quickly away. She poured Bill another coffee and asked to be excused for a minute. When she returned, she was wearing a transparent black negligee.

Bill started to tremble.

She came through the doorway, swaying her hips suggestively. She twisted the dimmer and the light faded.

Suddenly there was a loud scream.

A young child ran into the room. She saw Bill and ran over to Zena and buried her head in her shapely thighs.

"Mummy," she whined. "I can't sleep! Can I stay up and watch television?"

Olga, Zena had told Bill, just before he left, was a very strong-willed child who did not know the meaning of, "no!" He had left the room with the television blaring, dismissed into the unwelcoming night. He had groped back to his own house, all the lights extinguished, undressed in the dark, slid into bed next to Tania. She had her back to him, though Bill knew that she was awake.

"Goodnight, sweetheart!"

No answer.

Bill rolled over and went to sleep.

Zena had asked him to come again, but, she explained, she would be away for two weeks visiting her aged mother. Some story, thought Bill, smiling wickedly.

"Please give your mother my kind regards," he blurted, not knowing what else to say.

"But you 'ardly know 'er!" piped Zena. "You and your wives, zey 'ave not met 'er at all!"

"You're right, you know," grinned Bill foolishly. "Only trying to be friendly!"

"Of course, of course! I vill tell 'er about you, Beel. I vill tell 'er zat you are a most agreeable man. Eh? Iz zat ze right vay to put eet?"

"How kind of you," said Bill, already walking down the garden path.

When Zena returned two weeks later, she was accompanied by a burly man whom she introduced to Bill over the side fence as her brother. Tania was in the garden, and Bill introduced her in turn. They shook hands formally — much as wrestlers do before a bout, thought Bill, watching the fierce electricity in his wife's eyes, the wily friendliness of Zena towards her.

"Eet eez zo nice to meet Beel's wives," chanted Zena. "After all thees time!"

"Wives?" queried Tania, looking a little anxious.

"Wife," corrected Bill, shifting onto his left foot. "She is my wife!"

"Of course, you 'ave told me all about 'er, Beel, 'aven't you? You 'ave told me she vaz."

"Is," corrected Tania, surveying her coldly.

"How long will your brother be staying?" asked Bill, trying to look disinterested.

It seemed like months, but actually it was only three weeks. Bill was back in Zena's loungeroom, Tania on the two-seater next to him. Zena was serving them both coffee, offering them Hungarian cake.

"Eet is zo nice 'aving ze good neighbours," she was saying. "Beel and 'iz wives! Eet is zuch a shame zat I muzt zoon leave. My 'uzband iz coming for me, to take me back to 'Ungary. You zee, I never told, for I did not know whether I 'ave an 'uzband too!"

Her face lit up when announcing this surprise package, and she looked over at Tania with understanding.

"You! You have a husband?" said Bill, his ears red with anger.

"Of course I 'ave ze 'uzband. 'ow elze do you zeenk I 'ave ze leetle girl, eh? 'ow do zey zay it? Beel, you are zo naive!"

"You're right!" chimed Tania. "He is very naive. And his ears go red when he becomes angry!"

"'iz ears?" queried Zena, looking at Bill curiously. "Vy, 'ow strange!" She burst out laughing. "'ow strange zat you thought I deed not 'ave ze 'uzband. Just 'ow do you zeenk that eet is done, eh, to 'ave ze child?"

Bill stood up, straight as a ramrod, his ears bright crimson. "I think we should be going!" he said loudly. "Me and my wives. I think we have had enough — the lot of us!"

"You go, I'll stay," said Tania, picking up the coffee pot and helping herself to another cup. "I had no idea we had so charming a neighbour. And she will be with us for such a short time!"

"By all meanz, ztay," smiled Zena, as Bill walked out the door. "But, you vill excuse me, von't you? You vill excuse me if I first change into zomething just a leetle bit more comfortable?"

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