

VALENTINE'S DAY

by

Patrick O'Neil

I wake up to the sounds of my neighbors fucking. They just moved in a week ago. The walls are thin. She's a screamer. I saw them in the courtyard yesterday. I said hi and tried to be friendly. They ignored me and scurried into their apartment.

Their bed is banging the wall that separates us. It's the same wall my bed is against. The same wall I prop my pillows and rest my head on. We're probably less than a foot away from each other. They look like hippies, or Deadheads, or Burning Man rejects, or maybe just grungy hipsters.

She screams, "Oh my god, yes!" The bed bumps the wall.

I don't want to imagine them having sex. But it's hard not to with all this audio aid to help with the visuals. They've only been here a week, and I think they've had sex the entire time.

I'm half asleep. I have crusty eyes. My mouth is dry. It's 8:47 a.m. on a Monday morning. Can't they wait until a decent hour to fuck?

I need coffee. I need more sleep. I need to buy earplugs. I need to move out of my Hollywood low-life apartment building before I fucking kill somebody.

I get out of bed, grab my pants, and put them on. The bathroom tile is cool under my bare feet. I take a piss, brush my teeth, glance in the mirror, and un-bed head my hair with my hand. Somewhere in the apartment building next door, Madonna is singing about being like a virgin. Somehow that just doesn't seem right.

"Oh, oh, oh," screams my neighbor. Thump goes their bed against the wall. I walk back into my room and search for a T-shirt. Picking one off the floor, I pull it over my head and look over at the massive fishtail palm that takes up half the apartment. Yesterday I replanted it to a bigger pot. It looks so happy. I want to hug it.

Through gaps in the semi-open blinds I see the building manager outside in the courtyard talking on his cell phone. He's speaking Russian. His voice is deep. The smell of his cigarette floats in the open window. I imagine he is calling family back in the Ukraine, but he could just as easily be talking to someone a block away.

"Они имеют секс весь день. Он шальн," he says and stamps his cigarette out on the concrete.

"Yes. Yes. Yes!" screams my neighbor.

When I turn toward the kitchen, I can hear my other equally annoying neighbor's music—bad disco and the monotonous house music he plays nonstop. The thud of the

bass vibrates the wall. If I stand exactly in the middle of the room, I hear *thump*, *thump*, bad music on one side. And bang, bang, screaming sex on the other. It's like some demented stereo torture.

I'm going insane.

Slipping on my Chucks and sunglasses, I grab some cash off my desk and open the door. Outside the sun is bright, the air warm, the courtyard is deserted.

I walk out the back gate and through the parking lot. A bag lady looks up from rummaging in the Dumpster. I smile at her. She blows me a kiss. I look closer. She's a man.

Out on the boulevard a scruffy midget carrying an umbrella tries to hand me a brochure for a guided tour offering a drive through Beverly Hills to see the houses of movie stars. He must be new. All the other guys hawking tours have given up on me a long time ago. I ignore him and wait for the light as two girls dressed exactly the same in pink miniskirts and orange tube tops giggle and poke each other. Their laughter is high-pitched, almost squeals, and grating on my nerves. The midget smiles as he waves a brochure in their direction. They turn away laughing.

At the coffee shop the woman at the cash register leans over the counter and hugs me. She's really cute and, for some reason, likes me. I come in every morning, and we talk about shit all nothing. She seems to think my life is glamorous. I tell her it's pretty tame. She says yeah, but you get up at eleven. You don't go to a boring job. You're always happy. You're the coolest person that comes into the store.

I smile at her and wonder who the hell she's talking about.

"It's nine-fifteen," she says, looking at her watch. "What're you doing here so early?"

"My new neighbors fuck like bunnies and they're really loud," I tell her. "They woke me up, now I'm here."

"Wow. You should film them and post it on the Internet. You know, like on YouTube."

"I hadn't thought of that," I say and wonder if this is something she does all the time. Coffee in hand, I wave good-bye and walk outside. It may be early for me, but for Hollywood Boulevard it's just another business day as the usual mix of locals and tourists collide. A gutter punk wearing a leather jacket covered in spikes and grimy band logos points at her sick-looking dog and asks for spare change. A fat guy dressed in baggy checkered shorts and huge T-shirt with Michael Jackson's face on the front takes a picture of his equally large girlfriend as she squats on the sidewalk next to Walt Disney's star. A group of skinny kids all in black with peg-legged jeans and big hair stand around like they're posing for a CD cover.

I take a sip of coffee and watch a cop car slowly cruise the scene. Three chords off a twangy guitar and I turn around and see Elvis standing in a doorway, playing a beat-up white acoustic. He curls his lip in a sneer as he sings. "Blue, blue, blue suede

shoes.” Just in case you don’t know it’s him, he’s written *Elvis Presley* in flowing script across the face of his guitar. This piece of authenticity is not lost on me. But it’s way too early for Elvis. He looks really tattered and out of place in the bright morning sun. His skin’s kinda gray. His dyed black hair a tad too greasy and showing blond roots. His hand shakes as he strums. Looks like Elvis could use a fix.

I buy a newspaper at the corner store and step around the midget as he tries again to interest me in a tour. Why the hell anybody would want to drive around in a topless van just to see the homes of movie stars is beyond me. Sun burnt, breathing exhaust fumes, and surrounded by Japanese tourists taking pictures is not my idea of a good time.

When I get back to my apartment, there’s a lemon sitting on the stair outside my front door. Usually they just fall off the tree that’s in the courtyard and then lie there and rot, until someone picks them up and throws them away. But the lemon tree isn’t right next to my apartment, so it had had to be put there—like a gift. With the edge of my foot, I kick it into the jumble of spinney succulents that are taking over the patch of dirt the dead roses used to rule. I don’t trust my neighbors. I don’t want their offerings. Who knows where that lemon’s been?

Leaving the door open to let the warm air in, I sit at my desk and look at the computer. Popping the lid off my coffee, I take a sip and then scan my e-mails and see nothing but ads for offshore pharmacies selling Viagra and offers to enlarge my penis.

I wonder if movies stars in their fancy houses get e-mails for penis enlargement. Or are they too busy avoiding vanloads of tourists parked in their driveways?

I’d really just like to go back to bed. Go to sleep. Then wake up and start this day again.

“Fuck me. Fuck me harder,” screams my neighbor.