



KURT VONNEGUT
Next Door

The old house was divided into two dwellings by a thin wall that passed on, with high fidelity, sounds on either side. On the north side were the Leonards. On the south side were the Hargers.

The Leonards—husband, wife, and eight-year-old son—had just moved in. And, aware of the wall, they kept their voices down as they argued in a friendly way as to whether or not the boy, Paul, was old enough to be left alone for the evening.

‘Shhhhh!’ said Paul’s father.

‘Was I shouting?’ said his mother. ‘I was talking in a perfectly normal tone.’

‘If I could hear Harger pulling a cork, he can certainly hear you,’ said his father.

‘I didn’t say anything I’d be ashamed to have anybody hear,’ said Mrs. Leonard.

‘You called Paul a baby,’ said Mr. Leonard. ‘That certainly embarrasses Paul—and it embarrasses me.’

‘It’s just a way of talking,’ she said.

‘It’s a way we’ve got to stop,’ he said.

‘And we can stop treating him like a baby, too—*tonight*. We simply shake his hand, walk out,

and go to the movie.' He turned to Paul. 'You're not afraid – are you boy?'

'I'll be all right,' said Paul. He was very tall for his age, and thin, and had a soft, sleepy, radiant sweetness engendered by his mother. 'I'm fine.'

'Damn right!' said his father, clouting him on the back. 'I'll be an adventure.'

'I'd feel better about this adventure, if we could get a sitter,' said his mother.

'If it's going to spoil the picture for you,' said his father, 'let's take him with us.'

Mrs. Leonard was shocked. 'Oh – it isn't for children.'

'I don't care,' said Paul amiably. The why of their not wanting him to see certain movies, certain magazines, certain books, certain television shows was a mystery he respected – even relished a little.

'It wouldn't kill him to see it,' said his father.

'You know what it's about,' she said.

'What is it about?' said Paul innocently.

Mrs. Leonard looked to her husband for help, and got none. 'It's about a girl who chooses her friends unwisely,' she said.

'Oh,' said Paul. 'That doesn't sound very interesting.'

'Are we going, or aren't we?' said Mr. Leonard impatiently. The show starts in ten minutes.'

Mrs. Leonard bit her lip. 'All right!' she said bravely. 'You lock the windowns and the back door, and I'll write down the telephone numbers for the police and the fire department and the theater and Dr. Failey.' She turned to Paul. 'You can dial, can't you, dear?'

'He's been dialing for years!' cried Mr. Leonard.

'Ssssssh,' said Mrs. Leonard.

'Sorry,' Mr. Leonard bowed to the wall. 'My apologies, Paul, dear,' said Mrs. Leonard. 'What are you going to do while we're gone?'

'Oh – look through my microscope. I guess,' said Paul.

'You're not going to be looking at germs, are you?' she said.

'Nope – just hair, sugar, pepper, stuff like that,' said Paul.

His mother frowned judiciously. 'I think that would be all right, don't you?' she said to Mr. Leonard.

'Fine!' said Mr. Leonard. 'Just as long as the pepper doesn't make him sneeze!'

'I'll be careful,' said Paul.

Mr. Leonard winced. 'Shhhhh!' he said.

Soon after Paul's parents left, the radio in the Harger apartment went on. It was on softly at first – so softly that Paul, looking through his microscope on the living room coffee table, couldn't make out the announcer's words. The music was frail and dissonant – unidentifiable.

Gamely, Paul tried to listen to the music rather than to the man and woman who were fighting.

Paul squinted through the eyepiece of his microscope at a bit of his hair far below, and he turned a knob² to bring the hair into focus.³ It looked like a glistening brown eel, flecked here and there with tiny spectra where the light struck the hair just so.

There – the voices of the man and woman were getting louder again, drowning out the radio. Paul twisted the microscope knob nervously, and the objective lens⁴ ground into⁵ the glass slide on which the hair rested.

The woman was shouting now.

Paul unscrewed the lens, and examined it for damage.

Now the man shouted back – shouted something awful, unbelievable.

Paul got a sheet of lens tissue from his bedroom, and dusted at the frosted dot on the lens, where the lens had bitten into the slide. He screwed the lens back in place.

All was quiet again next door – except for the radio. Paul looked down into the microscope, down into the milky mist of the damaged lens.

Now the fight was beginning again – louder and louder, cruel and crazy, trembling, Paul sprinkled grains of salt on a fresh slide, and put it under the microscope.

The woman shouted again, a high, ragged, poisonous shout. Paul turned the knob too hard, and the fresh slide cracked and fell in triangles to the floor. Paul stood, shaking, wanting to shout, too – to shout in terror and bewilderment. It had to stop. Whatever it was, it had to stop!

'If you're going to yell, turn up the radio!' the man cried. Paul heard the clicking of the woman's heels across the floor. The radio volume swelled until the boom of the bass made Paul feel like he was trapped in a drum.

1. Gamely: bravely.

2. A knob: un bouton.

3. Bring into focus: mettre au point.

4. Objective lens: la lentille de l'objectif.

5. Grind into: frotter.

6. Screw: visser.

100 'And now!' bellowed the radio, 'for Katy and Fred! For Nancy and Bob, who thinks she's swell! For Arthur, from one who's worshipped him from afar for six weeks! Here's the old Glenn Miller Band and that all-time favorite, *Stardust!* Remember! If you have a dedication,⁷ call Milton nine-three-thousand! Ask for All-Night Sam, the record man!

105 The music picked up the house and shook it.
A door slammed next door. Now someone hammered⁸ on a door.
Paul looked down into his microscope once more, looked at nothing – while a prickling sensation spread over his skin. He faced the truth: The man and woman would kill each other, if he didn't stop them.

110 He beat on the wall with his fist. 'Mr. Harger! Stop it!' he cried.
'Mrs. Harger! Stop it!'
'For Ollie from Lavinia!' All-Night Sam cried back at him. 'For Ruth from Carl, who'll never forget last Tuesday! For Wilbur from Mary, who's lonesome tonight! Here's the Sauter-Finnegan Band asking, *Love, What Are You Doing to My Heart?*'

115 Next door, crockery⁹ smashed,¹⁰ filling a split second of radio silence.
And then the tidal wave of music drowned everything again.
Paul stood by the wall, trembling in his helplessness. 'Mr. Harger! Mrs. Harger! Please!'

120 'Remember the number!' said All-Night Sam. 'Milton nine-three-thousand! Dazed, Paul went to the phone and dialed the number.
'WJCD 11' said the switchboard operator.

125 'Would you kindly connect me with All-Night Sam?' said Paul.
'Hello!' said All-Night Sam. He was eating, talking with a full mouth. In the background, Paul could hear sweet, bleating music, the original of what was pending the radio next door.

130 'I wonder if I might make a dedication,' said Paul.
'During, why not,' said Sam. 'Ever belong to any organization listed as subversive by the Attorney General's office?'
Paul thought a moment. 'Nossir – I don't think so, sir,' he said.
'Shoot,'¹¹ said Sam.

135 'From Mr. Lemuel K. Harger to Mrs. Harger,' said Paul.
'What's the message?' said Sam.
'I love you,' said Paul. 'Let's make up¹² and start all over again.'

7. Dedication: a message the radio announcer reads before a piece of music is played (sent by one listener to another).
8. Hammer: knock hard.
9. Crockery: plates and cups.

10. Smashed: broke.
11. WJCD: the name of the radio station.
12. Shoot: start talking (= reading your dedication).
13. Wake up: get reconciled.

135 The woman's voice was so shrill with passion that it cut through the din of the radio, and even Sam heard it.

140 'Kid – are you in trouble?' said Sam. 'Your folks fighting?'
Paul was afraid that Sam would hang up on him if he found out that Paul wasn't a blood relative of the Hargers. 'Yessir,' he said.

145 'And you're trying to pull 'em back together again with this dedication?' said Sam.
'Yessir,' said Paul.

150 Sam became very emotional. 'O.K., kid,' he said hoarsely, 'I'll give it everything I've got. Maybe it'll work. Lonce saved a guy from shooting himself the same way.'

155 'How did you do that?' said Paul fascinated.
'He called up and said he was gonna blow his brains out,' said Sam, 'and I played *The Bluebird of Happiness*.' He hung up.
Paul dropped the telephone into its cradle. The music stopped, and Paul's hair stood on end. For the first time, the fantastic speed of modern communications was real to him, and he was appalled.

160 'Folks!' said Sam, 'I guess everybody stops and wonders sometimes what the heck he thinks he's doin' with the life the good Lord gave him! It may seem funny to you folks, because I always keep up a cheerful front, no matter how I feel inside, that I wonder sometimes, too! And then, just like some angel was trying to tell me, "Keep going, Sam, keep going," something like this comes along.'

165 'Folks!' said Sam, 'I've been asked to bring a man and his wife back together again through the miracle of radio! I guess there's no sense in kidding ourselves¹⁴ about marriage! It isn't any bowl of cherries! There's ups and downs, and sometimes folks don't see how they can go on!'

170 Paul was impressed with the wisdom and authority of Sam. Having the radio turned up high made sense now, for Sam was speaking like the right-hand man of God.

175 When Sam paused for effect, all was still next door. Already the miracle was working.

180 'Now,' said Sam, 'a guy in my business has to be half musician, half philosopher, half psychiatrist, and half electrical engineer! And! If I've learned one thing from working with all you wonderful people out there, it's this: If folks would swallow their self-respect and pride, there wouldn't be any more divorces!'

14. Kidding ourselves: having illusions.

There were affectionate coolings¹⁵ from next door. A Lump grew in Paul's throat as he thought about the beautiful thing he and Sam were bringing to pass.

175 'Folks!' said Sam, 'that's all I'm gonna say about love and marriage! That's all anybody needs to know! And now, for Mrs. Lemuel K. Harger, from Mr. Harger - I love you! Let's make up and start all over again!' Sam choked up. 'Here's Eartha Kit, and *Somebody Bad Stole De Wedding Bell!*' The radio next door went off.

180 The world lay still.
A purple emotion flooded Paul's being. Childhood dropped away, and he hung, dizzy on the brink of life, rich, violent, rewarding.

There was movement next door - slow, foot-dragging movement.

'So,' said the woman.

185 'Charlotte - ' said the man uneasily 'Honey - I swear. "I love you," she said bitterly, "let's make up and start all over again." "Baby,' said the man desperately, 'it's another Lemuel K. Harger. It's got to be!'

'You want your wife back?' she said. 'All right - I won't get in her way. She can have you, Lemuel - you jewel beyond price, you.'

'She must have called the station,' said the man.

'She can have you, you philandering, two-timing, two-bit loachinvar,' she said. 'But you won't be in very good condition.'

195 'Charlotte - put down that gun,' said the man. 'Don't do anything you'll be sorry for.'

'That's all behind me, you worm,' she said.

There were three shots.

200 Paul ran out into the hall, and bumped into the woman as she burst from the Harger apartment. She was a big, blonde woman, all soft and rawky like an homemade bed.

She and Paul screamed at the same time, and then she grabbed him as he started to run.

'You want candy?' she said wildly. 'Bicycle?'

205 'No, thank you,' said Paul shrilly. 'Not at this time.'

'You haven't seen or heard a thing!' she said. 'You know what happens to squealers?'¹⁸

15. Coolings: soft, affectionate sounds (the sounds made by pigeons).

16. Philandering: from a philanderer = someone who flirts a lot.

17. Loachinvar: a character in Walter Scott's

"Marrion", who is in love with a lady and runs away with her just before her marriage to another man.

18. Squealer: someone who informs the police about a crime that has been committed.

'Yes!' cried Paul.

She dug into her purse, and brought out a perfumed mulch¹⁹ of face tissues, bobbypins and cash. 'Here!' she panted. 'It's yours! And there's more ²¹⁰ where that came from, if you keep your mouth shut.' She stuffed it into his trousers pocket.

She looked at him fiercely, then fled into the street.

Paul ran back into his apartment, jumped into bed, and pulled the covers up over his head. In the hot, dark cave of the bed, he cried because ²¹⁵ he and All-Night Sam had helped to kill a man.

A policeman came clumping into the house very soon, and he knocked on both apartment doors with his billyclub.

220 Numb, Paul crept out of the hot, dark cave, and answered the door. Just as he did, the door across the hall opened, and there stood Mr. Harger, haggard but whole.

'Yes, sir?' said Harger. He was a small, balding man, with a hairline mustache. 'Can I help you?'

'The neighbors heard some shots,' said the policeman.

225 'Really?' said Harger urbanely. He dampened his mustache with the tip of his little finger. 'How bizarre. I heard nothing.' He looked at Paul sharply. 'Have you been playing with your father's guns again, young man?'

'Oh, nossir!' said Paul, horrified.

'Where are your folks?' said the policeman to Paul.

'At the movies,' said Paul.

'You're all alone?' said the policeman.

230 'Yessir,' said Paul. 'It's an adventure.'

'I'm sorry I said that about the guns,' said Harger. 'I certainly would have heard any shots in this house. The walls are thin as paper, and I heard nothing.'

Paul looked at him gratefully.

240 'And you didn't hear any shots, either, kid?' said the policeman. Before Paul could find an answer, there was a disturbance out on the street. A big motherly woman was getting out of a taxi-cab and wailing ²⁴⁵ at the top of her lungs. 'Lem! Lem baby!'

She barged into the foyer, a suitcase bumping against her leg and tearing her stockings to shreds. She dropped the suitcase, and ran to Harger, throwing her arms around him.

19. Mulch: mixture.

20. Wailing: crying, howling.

'I got your message, darling,' she said, 'and I did just what All-Night Sam told me to do. I swallowed my self-respect, and here I am!'

²⁴⁵ 'Rose, Rose, Rose – my little Rose,' said Harger. 'Don't ever leave me again.' They grappled with each other affectionately and staggered into their apartment.

'Just look at this apartment!' said Mrs. Harger. 'Men are just lost without women!' As she closed the door, Paul could see that she was ²⁵⁰ awfully pleased with the mess.

'You sure you didn't hear any shots?' said the policeman to Paul. The ball of money in Paul's pocket seemed to swell to the size of a watermelon. 'Yessir,' he croaked.

²⁵⁵ The policeman left. Paul shut his apartment door, shuffled into his bedroom, and collapsed on the bed.

The next voices Paul heard came from his own side of the wall. The voices were sunny – the voices of his mother and father. His mother was singing a nursery rhyme and his father was undressing him.

²⁶⁰ 'Diddle-diddle-dumpling, my son John,' piped his mother, 'Went to bed with his stockings on. One shoe off, and one shoe on – diddle-diddle-dumpling, my son John.'

Paul opened his eyes. 'Hi, big boy,' said his father, 'you went to sleep with all your clothes ²⁶⁵ on.'

'How's my little adventurer?' said his mother. 'O.K.,' said Paul sleepily. 'How was the show?'

'It wasn't for children, honey,' said his mother. 'Your would have liked the short subject, though. It was all about bears – cunning little cubs.'

²⁷⁰ Paul's father handed her Paul's trousers and she snook them out, and hung them neatly on the back of a chair by the bed. She patted them smooth, and felt the ball of money in the pocket. 'Little boys' pockets!' she said, delighted. 'Full of childhood's mysteries. An enchanted frog? A magic pocketknife from a fairy princess?' She caressed the lump.

²⁷⁵ 'He's not a little boy – he's a big boy,' said Paul's father. 'And he's too old to be thinking about fairy princesses.'

Paul's mother held up her hands. 'Don't rush it, don't rush it. When I saw him asleep there, I realized all over again how dreadfully short child-hood is.' She reached into the pocket and sighed wistfully. 'Little boys are ²⁸⁰ so hard on clothes – especially pockets.'

She brought out the ball and held it under Paul's nose, 'Now, would you mind telling Mommy what we have here?' she said gaily.

The ball bounced like a frowzy chrysanthemum, with ones, fives, tens, twenties, and lipstick-stained Kleenex for petals. And rising from it, ²⁸⁵ befuddling Paul's young mind, was the pungent musk of perfume.

Paul's father sniffed the air. 'What's that smell?' he said. Paul's mother rolled her eyes. 'Tabu,²¹' she said.

²¹ Tabu: the name of a perfume.

KURT VONNEGUT
was born in Indiana in 1922. During WWII, he was captured by the Germans and interned as a prisoner of war in Dresden.

This experience became the subject of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a novel which deals with the bombing of Dresden in 1945. The story is fragmented and its chronology distorted to render the absurdity and confusion of war. In his other works Vonnegut uses satire, irony, black humour and often science fiction in order to raise questions about modern existence in a world which is increasingly beyond people's control.

- Novels:**
Cat's Cradle (1963)
Slaughterhouse-Five (1969)
Short Stories:
Welcome to the Monkey House (1968)

