

Borders

by Hugo Dos Santos

The Ms went to church regularly, but only on Sundays at noon. And during football season they went earlier to the ten o'clock mass in order to be home for the games. We went every Sunday at the same time, year-round, and we prayed every night before bed, which we knew the Ms didn't do. We had named our guardian angels. We were closer to God than the Ms. I took it as a sign.

It's not enough to just be good, our father said. We have to combat evil, he added. He said it just like that. Combat, which I remember because it sounded weird to me back then. That word. Combat.

We were at the kitchen table and I looked at the door that led to the landing we shared with the Ms.

We have to combat the evil, our father said that night, as our mother cleared away the dishes. My brother and I looked at one another and nodded.

The Ms started doing many things that were very evil.

One thing they did that was evil, they used small plastic bags from the grocery store as garbage bags. They didn't tie the bags properly and there would be a mess everywhere, all over the sidewalk stinking up the street in front of our house.

Another thing they did, they watched movies with the tv very loud. We could hear it in the hallway.

At first we liked the Ms. When they moved in our mother talked to their mother in the stairwell. My brother and I played in our room and heard them talking but we never paid attention to what they said. They would be out there for a long time, on the landing. Sometimes one hour. One time they were out there longer than that, each with a laundry basket at the hip, just talking.

I walked out there and asked our mother if she was ok.

Yes, our mother said. I am just talking to Mrs. M. Did you say hello?

Hello, I said.

I'll be right in, our mother said with a knowing smile. I went back to playing. I didn't hate the Ms back then.

The Ms had a son and a daughter. The son was older than my brother, so he was older than me too. He was weird and only had a few friends at school and then came straight home. The daughter was younger than me, so she was younger than my brother too.

She had her hair in a pony tail and wore lots of hair spray. She had a gold ring with her name on it.

We never spoke to her.

They walked home from school together and promptly locked the door to their apartment. They never played outside, not even in the summer.

The Ms did not care about where they lived. They made this clear in several ways.

One thing they did that showed they didn't care, they never vacuumed. We never heard a vacuum in their apartment.

Another thing they did, they sometimes left the front door to the street open, with the deadbolt turned to keep the door from closing all the way. I tried to catch them doing this, several times, because I was sure it was them and I wanted to tell them how wrong this was. If I had caught them in the act, I might have only said something very small even though I really wanted to say many things. But I would have given them a look that meant as much and they would have known.

I never caught them. Each time I closed the door properly and hoped they would be stuck outside so that they could learn a lesson.

The Ms had no friends. They never had anyone over. They were very unfriendly people.

Over the summer, the Ms put up a flag on the door to their apartment. This was right after the World Cup. The flag hung down from the top and covered almost the entire door. It was blue and white and red.

That night, our father asked us if we had seen the flag.

My brother and I both said yes, though I had been the first to see it.

This is unbelievable, our father said. They don't care about where they live. Who ever heard of putting a flag on a door?

The next morning, after our father and mother had each gone to their jobs, I waited for my brother to go into the bathroom. I took the scissors from one of the kitchen drawers and I walked up to the Ms' door and I cut a small piece off their flag.

I knew the Ms were gone, I had heard them going down the stairs when they left, all four of them together, so I didn't have to worry about being caught. I cut a triangle from the bottom left corner and I put the piece of fabric in my pocket like a trophy and walked back inside our apartment.

Then I worried that I would be caught so I hid the fabric in the drawer where my brother kept his underwear.

In church, we learned about the importance of repenting for sins.

At the dinner table that night, our father asked us whether we had thought about the sermon.

I said yes.

My brother nodded.

I thought of many things the Ms had done wrong.

One thing they had done wrong, they sometimes didn't go to church.

Another thing they did, they made weird foods that made the landing outside our apartment smell for days. I had heard that people from where the Ms were from ate cow tongues and pig heads.

Another thing they did, they watched movies with the tv even louder than before.

My father was very upset about it. He told my mother that if they kept playing the tv so loud one day he would go and knock down their door.

Later that year, when the weather got cold, the Ms started drying laundry in the landing we shared with them. They set up a rack right outside their door, a mere ten feet from the door to our apartment, and they hung everything from socks to dresses on that rack. And once those clothes dried the Ms took them inside and put out other clothes to dry. It got so bad that we couldn't walk in or out of our apartment or go to sleep or watch tv without clothes out there drying on the landing.

The third floor neighbors would walk by on their way in and out and they would see that mess out there, right at our door.

It was so embarrassing. I hated the Ms.

My brother and I decided that something had to be done. One day, as we were leaving for school, we grabbed one of the dresses drying on the rack. It was garbage day, so we threw it in one of the gray garbage pails on the way to school. We tried our best to hide it under some of the bags but we didn't want to touch the garbage. We ran the rest of the way, partly out of euphoria partly nervous we'd get caught.

At night we told our mother what we had done.

Her eyes got very big and she asked us why we had done it.

I said, To teach them a lesson.

A few weeks later the Ms added another rack. The weather was brutal at this point and it seemed like it was snowing every night but they were still dirtying clothes and washing them and drying them on our landing. It was so bad that from our doorway I had only to take one step and stretch out my arm to touch one of the racks.

It's too close, our father said. Every time we walk in we have to look at their longjohns?

I never saw a family dirty so many clothes, our mother said.

Our father said they had no respect. Watch out for people like that, he said. That's why it's so important for you to learn proper manners, he said to me and my brother, though he looked more intently at me. Those people are miserables, he said.

We didn't even say hello to the Ms when we saw them in the street or at the supermarket or school.

One morning that winter, after a really bad snow storm closed school for three days, we helped our father clear out his car by digging out the spot where he was parked on our street so he could go to work. There was snow everywhere and no place to put it. It took us two hours to finish but we had fun. After our father pulled out we blocked the spot with a bucket and a plank of wood we had found in the basement of our building.

My brother and I looked at our work and threw snow at each other and then we went inside with our mother.

When our father came home from work that evening he found another car parked in the spot we had cleared. Someone had moved the bucket and the plank of wood and parked in the spot we had cleared. Our father had to drive around for 35 minutes before finally finding an open spot three blocks away.

At the kitchen table we watched our father eat and he told us about what had happened to him and explained how a small white car with tinted windows had taken our spot.

That's the Ms' car, I said.

Our father and mother looked at each other.

Yeah, my brother added. I saw them going in that car last week.

Over the next few weeks, I looked for the Ms' car everywhere. I even volunteered to run to the corner store for my mother a few times hoping I would find it. Walking to and from school, I kept my keys ready just in case.

At some point I realized that the Ms spoke a different kind of E than we did. I had always just thought it was their accent but some of the words they used weren't words at all, just made up names for things that had proper names if only the Ms spoke proper E.

I knew where they were from and that they had left there less than one year before, but I had never noticed how silly their speaking was. Once I realized it, I noticed it every time they and other people like them talked.

People that speak that kind of way have no respect. We knew that. Everyone in the neighborhood knew that. Those people have crazy haircuts. They wear their jeans low and their shirts loose and a good number of them are liars and cheaters. Criminals. The Ms had seemed different to us at first, like they weren't like most of their kind. But then we realized that we had been wrong. Then we realized that they had tricked us.

One time, as I was coming back from the corner store with a bag of potatoes, I saw the Ms, all four of them, come out of the front door and head in the opposite direction. They didn't see me so I followed them, hiding between cars. I hoped I would find their car at last.

They stopped at the corner and when a bus came a few minutes later they got in. I didn't get to see their car.

One Saturday afternoon when the snow on the street was starting to melt, the Ms were watching their tv really loud and our father got very mad and sent my brother to knock on their door and tell them that their tv was too loud.

My brother came back and said that the Ms had said ok but then their tv was even louder so our father called the police and told them that the Ms had their tv too loud.

My brother and I put our ears to the door when we heard the police coming up the stairs and knocking on the Ms' door. There was talking and then the police left and the tv was lower. Then it got loud again, really loud, louder than ever and our father was getting ready to send our mother to talk to the Ms when we heard a scream.

It was a scream to stop everything. I'm sure everyone heard it, from the first floor all the way to the third. We waited. Their tv was still loud but the scream had been louder so we were waiting for an explanation since we knew there were only a few things that could cause a scream of that kind. Then there were people coming up the stairs and there was more talking outside our door and we heard Mrs. M and it sounded like she was crying.

We saw an ambulance outside. We heard more talking in the landing. Then there was walking down the stairs and it sounded like people were carrying something heavy because we kept hearing instructions like Let's go really slow and Let's put him down for a second and He's falling off the side and We're ok, it's ok, hold on, ok, come on, one more step.

Their tv went off and there was a ringing in the air like when you're alone and it's really quiet.

We heard someone locking the Ms' door and there was a really loud bang at our door. Our father made his eyes very big and put his right index finger to his mouth. I remember, it was his right index finger. We were in the kitchen very quiet looking at each other.

There was a loud bang again as if someone had a large hammer and had pounded our door with it. Then there was a scream loud like the one we had heard before, but this one was deeper and scared us because it was much bigger than our door. I couldn't imagine how a scream like that could fit in the landing. We looked at my father's finger again. We waited.

Then steps ran down the stairs and slammed the front door shut.

We opened our door and looked out into the landing. The racks were on the floor, off to the side by the stairs leading up to the floor above, and there were clothes on the floor too.

The Ms changed after that.

One thing they did that was a change, they took away the racks, though the weather was nicer now and I noticed they were drying clothes in the line outside their windows.

Another thing they did, we never heard their tv again.

Father said, some people have to be taught a lesson. Look at the Ms, they learned. You have to do the right thing.

One Sunday, coming home from church, I asked our father about ghosts. Are they real?

Of course not, he said, turning the key to the front door.

Our mother made lunch and while we were at the table we heard three sets of steps walk out of the Ms' apartment and down the stairs.

Ghosts aren't real, he said. I don't believe in ghosts.

By that summer the Ms were gone. Another family moved in but we never talked to them and they never talked to us. They spoke our kind of E and their kids were very young.

They were different.

One thing they did that was different, they had a vacuum.

Another thing they did, we never heard their tv.

Another thing they did, in the fall, they started coming to our church.