

The Neighborhood

by James Lynn Smith

She drove their Suburu into the older part of town.

“Hey, stop a minute,” her husband said. “I remember this alley.”

“What’s so special,” she asked, pulling to the curb.

“It reminds me of the once busy life in this run-down neighborhood. Looks quiet and deserted now. They’re gonna raze this whole block and put up high-rise apartments. Folks will be isolated in individual units inside buildings with a lot of space between them. Kid’s can’t play ball on the wide streets; too much traffic.”

“Sounds like that’s an advantage,” she said. “Crowded living areas are a blight.”

He looked at her. “Maybe, in some ways. But it won’t be as lively. Here we used to know our neighbor’s name. We’d know if they were working or broke. I could hang out the window and flirt with the girl in the next building.”

“I’ll bet you did a lot of that.”

“Never was a *lot*. Her momma would always call her away from the window for some useless task. Must have thought my hormones could fly through the air.”

“Who else did you know?” she asked.

“There was this fella called Jess Yuan. He could win a contest for the scariest face in town. Poor devil didn’t get out much and never had money, so his wife couldn’t have married him for that. We figured she must have had her eyeballs installed backwards.

“Anyhow, one day a delivery truck was creeping along this narrow alley, almost scrubbing the brick walls. After a while, it stopped. A mangy, rag-eared

bulldog sat in front of it and wouldn't move. A man from the truck tried to coax it away, but it growled and almost attacked. Before long, there was a big commotion. Folks were hanging outside windows, leaning over banisters, and making a lot of noise to get the dog moving. But it wouldn't go.

“Just so happened that Jess Yahn came around the corner into the alley at that time, on his way home. The dog took one look at him, sprang up, went rigid, yelped and took off like it'd seen a specter from Hell. The reclusive Jess paid no mind, quickly went to his place, and the truck got on its way while folks ducked back into their quarters.”

“Why'd the dog run off,” she asked.

“The best we could figure is that some faces are like antigravity. The dog was no beauty. But one peek at Jess, and it felt an overwhelming blow from the sheer power of ugly.”

She knitted her brows. “I think you're making up stuff. Shame on you.”

“Would I do that?” he asked. “Anyway the result was good. Jess got a job out of all this.”

“What was that?”

“The city hired him to come out and simply ‘be at large’ in the community so stray dogs would feel safer in the pound than on streets.”

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