



the girl  
next door

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NOBLE

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*'Green lungs'. Isn't that what they call parks in big cities? It isn't true in New York. In New York, Central Park – almost 850 acres of priceless real estate in one of the world's greatest cities – is not the lungs. It's the heart. Walk around any of the paths, away from the bullaballoo, the tourists studying maps, the omnipresent runners, the pretzel sellers, and you'll find benches everywhere. There are more than 9,000 of them. Since 1986, the Central Park Conservancy has run a programme called Adopt-a-Bench, allowing residents of the city to dedicate one to someone they have loved, and love still. Here is where you feel, and hear, the heart of the city beating. There's a marriage proposal on a bench by the Zoo. Statements of joy and happy memories and grateful thanks on rows of benches by playgrounds – at the Alice in Wonderland statue, facing the Carousel, along the water. Since 9/11, there are benches that can make you tear up, just reading the plaques. For young men and women, dead too soon, and those they left behind. 'To the world you were one person. To one person you were the world.'*

*I chose Cedar Hill for mine. It was one of your favourite places. In the winter, children toboggan there, filling the air with their laughter. In the fall, the colours are extraordinary. In the summer, it's close to the ice-cream truck that parks on 5th, and shady. But I may like spring the best of all. Full of promise and new beginnings. Not for me, maybe, but for the people I watch.*

*I wondered for a long, long time how to inscribe the plaque. Whitman, or Emerson? Puccini? A declaration of my own?*

*In the end, though, I chose just your name. Everything else belonged to me, and I kept it inside, written on my heart, and not in this one.*

Eight a.m.

The night doorman, Jesus, was coming off his shift. Before Raoul, his replacement, arrived, he mopped the marble foyer, and diligently polished the brass tread on the door threshold. The day-shift doorman changed into his smart grey uniform in the staff bathroom. The porter travelled to each floor in the service elevator, collecting the black sacks of trash and sorted recycling that people left out there. In the basement, the super checked his list to see who was on, who was away, who was having things delivered or taken away. He'd done this fifty weeks of each year for more than fifteen years. He and his wife lived in a small apartment at the back downstairs. They'd raised their boys there, though they were grown up and gone now.

In apartment 7B, Maria Piscatella kissed her husband Earnest goodbye, chastely on the cheek, smoothing his hair down habitually as he left for work, and contemplated the breakfast dishes and another day. Her two children smiled down at her in their high-school graduation outfits, from the 8" × 10" photographs that hung on the kitchen wall. She knew they'd both still be asleep, in their college beds in their college dorms far

away. Up late, no doubt, last night studying or partying. Bradley had been gone from here two years, and Ariel since last September, and she still missed them every, every day. The apartment was still too quiet. There wasn't enough mess. She had two plates, two glasses and two mugs to load into the dishwasher. One bed to make. And no laundry today. If you'd told her ten years ago how much she would miss all of that, she'd have laughed and told you you were crazy.

Upstairs, in 8A/B Blair Stewart's housekeeper Mary would also have laughed. She'd been up since six, waking alone in the windowless maid's room off the laundry, as she had done for the past six months, and now she was serving waffles – each plate configured slightly differently – to the Stewarts' three kids, while Blair issued the day's instructions, and Bobbie moaned that the dry cleaners hadn't returned his grey pinstripe. Mary didn't mind being told what to do (wrong career path, if she did), but she hated the way Mrs Stewart did it. When she said 'clean the laundry room', she always added 'really well, please, Mary' as though there were any other way to do it, or as if she ever did anything else. You'd think a woman who was so damn particular about how things were done would do some of them herself. But, of course, Mrs Stewart was perpetually busy. Today was a luncheon. Mary had still to figure out what elevated a regular lunch by those three letters into a luncheon, but she figured it had something to do with money. Mrs Stewart would go to that gym, on the corner of Madison and 85th, the one she went to every

day during the week, and then get her hair blown out and get dressed up to go out and ‘do good’. Forget about doing any good in her own home. Mary didn’t like Blair Stewart at all. God knows she needed a job, and the money wasn’t bad here, but if it weren’t for the kids, she’d be thinking about finding something else already. The kids were okay. A little lazy, a little spoilt maybe – but whose kids weren’t, these days?

Dr Hunter Stern, in 4A, slept on. He never had a patient until 11 a.m., and since he saw patients in the apartment, he never needed to get up before 10.30. An insomniac since his twenties, he was never asleep before three or four in the morning, and he wore earplugs so that the cacophony of a Manhattan morning didn’t disturb him once he had dropped off. He couldn’t take sleeping pills. He had an addictive personality, like so many of the patients he counselled. That ruled out red wine, too, which would also have worked. He read biographies avidly, and usually dozed off, eventually, on the sofa, heavy tomes rising and falling on his chest.

Across the hall, Violet Wallace fried an egg and two rashers of bacon, as she did every morning of the week. She carried the plate through to the dining room, where she had laid the table the night before, with a linen napkin and silver cutlery, and switched on the BBC World Service on the radio. Cat, the smoky Abyssinian cat she had resisted getting for so long, refusing to conform to the stereotype of the single old lady, and whom she still tokenly resisted loving by calling her Cat, curled her tail around Violet’s chair, rubbing her back against

Violet's legs, oblivious to her mistress's ambivalence.

Above her, in 5B, Gregory Cole fed Ulysses, his chocolate-brown Labrador, who licked his hand appreciatively, while his partner Todd took a shower. Todd ate breakfast with his assistant, Gabrielle, at the office every day, so Greg made a bowl of granola with yoghurt for himself, and flipped open the *Times*, leaning against the granite breakfast bar in their kitchen.

'Sit down to eat,' Todd called from the bedroom.

'You can't even see me!'

'Doesn't mean I don't know what you're doing ...'

Charlotte Murphy peered into the mirror, as she did every morning in 2A, and was, as she was every morning, disappointed to see herself peering back. Through the thin partition wall in 2B, built before building codes came into effect, Madison Cavanagh had the opposite reaction as she tossed her mane of Bergdorf Blonde hair, and carefully applied another coat of lengthening mascara to lashes that already almost hit her eyebrows.

Upstairs in 3A, newcomer Emily Mikanowski stretched her body into the Cat on her yoga mat, trying to ignore the pile of boxes in the living room that still needed to be unpacked, while next door Arthur Alexander dreamed his troubled dreams and snored, spittle settling into the corners of his mouth, and on the other side Hung Hamazaki, just back from a fast three-mile run, turned on the shower and hoped the hot water would come through fast. He liked to be at his desk at work by 8.45.

The furnace burned, and the pipes ran. Kettles boiled on stovetops, and radiators creaked.

The building was waking up.