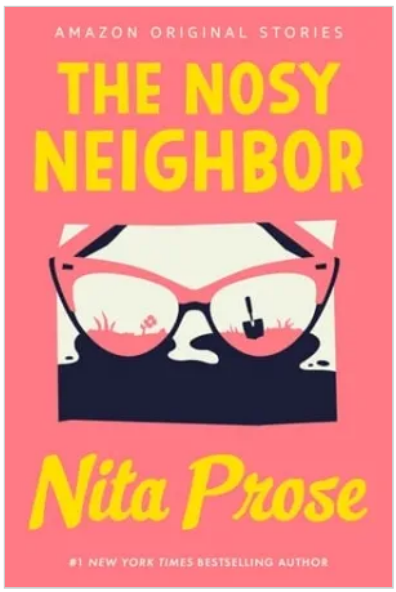

The Nosy Neighbor (Busybodies #4)

Author: *Nita Prose*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: For decades, Marge has been spying on her neighbors Doris and Bob, reporting every sordid thing she sees to her husband, Harold. Flamboyant Doris and boring Bob are an odd couple, but as Marge watches their comings and goings, she starts to wonder if there's more than meets the eye. Is Doris's latest hobby—flamenco dancing, of all things—an attempt to spice things up, or is there something more sinister going on in the house across the street? Soon enough, Marge learns that digging into her suspicions means digging herself into a very deep hole.

Nita Prose's The Nosy Neighbor is part of Busybodies, a collection of quirky mysteries featuring amateur gumshoes who stumble upon peculiar cases. Calling all snoops! Read or listen to each arresting story in a single sitting.

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The thing about Doris is she’s a busybody with her nose up in everyone else’s business.

You know the type—the first to offer advice, the last to take it? She’s been like that for as long as I’ve known her, which is almost fifty years.

Doris waltzed over here the other day, pounding on my front door, and when I opened it, she said,

“You need to get out more, Marge—socialize. You can’t stay holed up in your house like a terrified rat, judging everyone and—”

I stopped her there. “We are just fine the way we are, thank you very much.”

Harold was seated in the living room in his favorite easy chair. He needs help getting up and down the stairs, and ever since the accident two years ago, he’s lost the ability to speak, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t listening.

“Marge, why don’t you find a new hobby—other than staring out your picture window at Bob and me all day?”

You see? That’s pure Doris right there—dispensing advice no one ever asked her for. She’s always going on about how to “max out on life,”

as if the rest of us are just squandering our time on Earth, which according to the great guru herself is a capital crime.

“What’s the point if you’re not going to live life to the fullest? Live it or lose it, Marge.”

That’s what she always says.

If Doris’s constant barrage of advice isn’t galling enough, her flamboyance, flirtation, and attention-seeking behavior makes her even harder to tolerate. For goodness’ sake, she is my age—seventy-five years old—and yet these days, she carries on like a randy teenager. It goes to show you that contrary to popular opinion, wisdom does not always come with age. If anything, it runs the other way a lot of the time.

Harold, my dear husband, has never liked Doris. In the old days, he avoided her, said she was a floozy and didn’t treat her husband at all well. I’ve always been determined to love my neighbor, though Doris has never made it easy. As for her husband, Bob, he’s Doris’s polar opposite. He’s the kind of man who wouldn’t hurt a fly. Lately, he’s slowing down, sicker than usual, a bit more wheezy and unsteady on his feet. The poor man’s allergic to everything—shellfish, cats, eggs, peanuts, and even evergreen trees. But Bob, like my Harold, is never one to complain.

I still remember the day, nearly fifty years ago, when Doris and Bob moved into the bungalow across the street from ours. I was watching from our picture window when the moving van pulled up. Behind it was a woman about my age, driving a lime-green convertible. A bespectacled, pale bald man sat in the passenger seat beside her.

“Looks like the new neighbors are moving in,”

Harold said. I joined him in the picture window where he stood, surveying the scene.

Doris stepped out of the driver’s seat wearing a yellow poodle skirt, red pumps, Jackie O cat-eye glasses, and a checkered kerchief over her bottle blond bouffant. Bob emerged from the convertible next, wearing thick glasses, beige slacks, and a

plain golf shirt. Upon exiting that showy convertible, Bob started lugging boxes from the back seat to the front door while Doris barked at him as though he was her personal Sherpa.

“Bob, don’t drop that! Bob, go tell that handsome young mover where to put the credenza. Bob, as soon as we’re moved in, you’re painting our front door a real color.”

And so it began.

All the houses on our street are modest, tan bungalows with taupe eaves troughs and beige porches—dignified and discreet—but Doris’s house has a bright-yellow front door.

“Why is everyone around here so drab?”

she opined to me a while ago when she stopped by for her weekly nosy-neighbor check-in. “The living dead. Just like my husband. I keep telling him, if you act dead, the reaper will find you faster.”

Cheating death: that’s been Doris’s recurring theme for the last few years—that and refusing to grow old with any semblance of grace.

“When I grow old, I shall wear purple,”

she pronounced on her sixty-fifth birthday, and true to her word, she’s worn purple regularly for a decade—and red sequins, and polka dots, and fringe, often at the same time. I always thought that once she became a pensioner, she’d mellow out and turn down the volume on the kooky Mrs. Robinson act, but if anything, it’s become more shrill in recent years.

I have watched from the comfort of this picture window as Doris has taken up hobby after new hobby in her dotage, claiming she's on the hunt for "inspiration."

First, it was tai chi—private lessons in her living room with a strapping young man called Master Tim. But when she learned the master had a boyfriend, she quit tai chi instantly.

Next, she took up life drawing—"Nudes,"

she pronounced, "the passion of the flesh."

An easel appeared in her living room, and a stream of strange men visited regularly, posing for her—shirts off, muscles bulging. I caught glimpses from my window, and when the curtains were inevitably drawn midsession, I got a pretty good sense of what was happening in that living room, and let's just say I suspect it was more than art. Bob—oh, poor old Bob—was conveniently sent away on errands during "art time,"

only to return once that day's hulking Fabio was long gone.

But "art time"

didn't last long, either, which I was grateful for, since Doris was flipping more beefcakes than In-N-Out Burger on a busy Friday night. Then, out of nowhere, a few months ago, she showed up on my doorstep to announce her latest hobby.

"Please tell me it's bird-watching or stamp collecting," I said.

"Flamenco dancing,"

she replied, striking a pose that resembled not so much a graceful Spanish dancer as a

snappy sand crab. “And this time,”

Doris added, “Bob’s taking lessons with me.”

“What?”

I replied. “Your Bob?”

“Of course ‘my Bob.’ Which other Bob is there, Marge?”

Doris haughtily replied.

I was genuinely confused. Bob has always been a homebody who enjoys organizing and labeling things. His idea of socializing is waving from across the street while watering the lawn. Moreover, Bob is a wheezy, nearsighted asthmatic as allergic to physical activity as he is to everything under the sun. The older he gets, the weaker he’s become, to the point where it’s worrisome.

“Flamenco,”

I repeated, still trying to imagine Bob doing any kind of dance.

“I’ve endured him and his excuses far too long,”

Doris explained. “He’s asthmatic, not dead. He needs an activity that will build his stamina and strength—not to mention his libido. It’s about time he livens things up, ignites some passion for a change. And if he can’t, well ...”

At this point, she ran her manicured index finger across her neck, a gesture I took to mean only one thing.

“You can’t be serious,”

I said. “After all these years, you’d consider a divorce?”

“Who said anything about a divorce?”

Doris replied. Then she nattered on about how her new flamenco teacher, Antonio, had a passion for castanets ... and for many other things besides.

The moment she left my house, I reported the entire conversation to Harold, who as usual was seated in his easy chair in the living room. “Flamenco, at her age,”

I said. “Can you believe it?”

I’ll admit I do miss the sound of Harold’s voice. But I can practically read his mind, and what he’s not saying out loud is that he’d prefer I didn’t fraternize with Doris at all. But what am I supposed to do—ignore her? Send her away? “She’s our neighbor,”

I tell him. “I can’t pretend she doesn’t exist.”

A couple of days ago, Doris popped by my house yet again, pounding on my door, then walking right in like she owned the place. As usual, she failed to greet Harold.

“We’re going away, Bob and me,”

she announced out of nowhere.

“Away? What do you mean?”

Now keep in mind that Doris and Bob haven’t left the country in all the years I’ve

known them. Bob’s asthma is aggravated by airplanes, and his food allergies make travel to foreign lands nearly impossible, much to Doris’s chagrin. It was for this reason that, at first, I wasn’t quite sure what Doris was nattering on about.

“I’ve booked Bob and me a special long weekend in Spain. We’ll be studying flamenco with one of the world’s foremost dancers. And if that doesn’t get Bob’s juices flowing, that’ll spell the end for sure.”

I was struck speechless. Her mention of Bob’s juices produced a most unwelcome image in my mind.

“Spain,”

I managed to say. “For how long?”

“Three nights,”

she replied.

“That’s it?”

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I asked. “That’s a long way to go for such a short time.”

“You never know,”

she replied. “One of us might like it so much, we may never come back!”

She laughed then, mouth wide open, head thrown back with abandon.

I stayed quiet, because I didn’t like what I was hearing. To be honest, I knew there was something odd about this trip, but I couldn’t figure out what.

“We leave in two days, and I was wondering,”

she said, “if you’d mind looking after the house while we’re gone ... since you’re always watching it anyways. Can you keep an eye on things and water the new hydrangeas outside?”

“You don’t have hydrangeas,” I said.

“If you could spy into my backyard the same way you can into my living room, you’d know that I just planted a fresh plot. They’ll need water to thrive.”

“Very well,”

I said. “You’ll leave me a house key?”

“Marge, don’t pretend you know nothing about the key under the welcome mat.”

Of course I knew she kept one there, had seen her slip it under the mat ages ago. That's how the parade of men always entered. But what I didn't know is that Doris knew that I knew. "Fine,"

I said. "I'll keep an eye on things."

"I'm sure you will,"

Doris replied. And with that, she click-clacked her inappropriately pink kitten heels out of my house and back to her own.

Now, here I am at my picture window, two days after Doris's big holiday weekend announcement. As I watch, Doris backs her candy-apple-red sedan out of her garage (heaven forbid Bob be permitted to take the wheel). Her tinted window is rolled down, and she's waving my way.

"Live large, Marge, while you still can!"

she calls out loudly enough that I can hear her through my closed living room window. "And water my plants!"

I try to spot Bob in the passenger seat beside her—poor, long-suffering Bob—but Doris promptly rolls up her window, then screeches down the street before I can so much as glimpse her husband.

I drop the curtain and turn to face Harold in his easy chair. "She's gone,"

I say. "Are you happy? We get a break from her shenanigans."

With that, I go brew a cup of tea, then return to my chair by the picture window. I sip until I drain the last dregs. Then it's time to go to Doris and Bob's.

“I’ll be back,”

I tell Harold as I head to the door.

I amble down my stairs, holding tight to the railing. At my age, holding tight has become a way of life. I make my way over to Doris and Bob’s front door, where I stand on their welcome mat—if that’s what you’d call it. From my window, I never could make out what it said, but from here I can read it clearly: “I see London, I see France ...”

It takes me a minute, but then I remember the childish rhyme. Only Doris would welcome guests with a joke about their underpants.

It’s been a couple of years since I’ve been inside this house, but little has changed. Doris still has that gaudy lamp in the living room—a woman’s leg in a fishnet stocking, with a lampshade trimmed in black fringe. The wall behind it features new “artwork”—hairy male nudes in various states of undress. I step closer to see if my hunch is correct—it is. Each piece in this oeuvre is signed by the great artiste herself, Doris.

Everything else in the open-concept living room / kitchen is exactly as it always was, but as I walk to the sliding back doors, I spot the new flower bed in the backyard—a six-foot rectangular patch piled high with freshly turned soil, budding hydrangeas planted on one end.

“Absolutely ridiculous,”

I say out loud as I exit and walk over to the garden plot that Doris has shaped like a buried coffin. What the hell was she thinking?

I locate the hose and drench the bed with water, though it’s clear either Bob or Doris

(probably Bob) watered just before leaving. Once done, I'm about to head inside when something on the patio crunches under my heel—a shelled peanut. I spot a couple more on the slabs by the sliding door. Damn squirrels. They steal nuts from bird feeders and carry them everywhere. It's a good thing Bob's not here since he's deathly allergic.

I head back into the house and make my way to Doris's picture window. How strange to see my world from her point of view—my empty easy chair by the window, and beyond that, Harold, seated in his chair as usual. On top of Doris's credenza is a collection of framed photos—Doris with Master Tim in some kind of crouching-tiger pose; Doris wearing paint-covered overalls, holding a palette and surrounded by her terrible art; and Doris and Bob in full flamenco regalia—she the diva, in a ruffled, floor-length gown, and he looking anemic in an ill-fitting bolero shirt and pants so tight it's a wonder they didn't burst their seams. Oh, poor, poor Bob.

I consider a room-by-room inspection of Doris's entire house, but I'm not a snoop by nature. I lock her front door and head home. The moment I enter the house, I hear my phone ringing in the living room. I hustle to grab it. The call screen warns me who it is before her irritating voice confirms it.

"Doris? Why on earth are you calling me so soon?" I ask.

"Where the hell were you, Marge?"

Doris replies. "I've been ringing you for half an hour."

Since it's none of Doris's business what I do with my time, I don't reply.

"Well, stuff my cornhole with a beanbag,"

says Doris. "You were already poking around my house, weren't you?"

So often, the best response with Doris is none at all.

“You know what, Marge? Fill your boots,”

Doris says. “But when you’re next at my place, please throw out the leftover tuna fish Bob left in the fridge. It’ll stink to high heaven if it’s left for days. Can you do that? Marge?”

“Yes,” I reply.

“Good,”

says Doris.

“Have a nice vacation,” I say.

“I intend to have the time of my life,”

Doris replies, then hangs up.

I huff as I put down my phone. Even in her absence, Doris has found a way to meddle. I’ll bet my right arm she left the tuna in the fridge, not Bob, but Her Royal Highness would never admit to any wrongdoing. Aggravated, I make a cup of tea, then sit in my chair by the picture window.

“What?”

I ask Harold. I can tell the call has unsettled him too. “Don’t worry,”

I say. “I am not at Doris’s beck and call. I’m not rushing over to her house again just because she told me to.”

I sip my tea, refilling it from time to time as I spend the day surveying our street. How quiet it's become over the years. In the old days, it was bursting with activity—kids on bicycles, dogs running loose (mostly Doris and Bob's stupid cocker spaniel). Back in those days, Harold and I used to sit on the front porch after work and greet everyone else as they arrived home. I was so happy to leave my windowless cubicle and come back home to all the hustle and bustle, and same for Harold, who tolerated office work but was happiest right here in our home.

Back then, we knew the names of everyone on the street, and they knew ours. Weekends meant barbecues and birthday parties. There wasn't a celebration that we didn't mark as a community. With no kids of our own, we served as an informal neighborhood watch. That's the way it was back then: people looked out for each other, and people were grateful for the extra pairs of eyes.

In the old days, when a neighbor's husband on the street took ill, I'd bring a casserole over. "This is for you,"

I'd say to the wife. "Now tell me, what exactly is wrong with your husband?"

The odd time some Nosy Nancy would spread a rumor, I was quick to get the real story and then put a stop to it—"Did you hear that Barbara Sanderson got fired?"

I'd say. "It can't be true, can it?"

No one talks to anyone anymore. The older generation is nearly gone—downsized or dead—leaving only a few members of the old guard left. I've tried to make connections with the new, young families, but no one seems neighborly these days. The youngsters play video games indoors, and the only signs of life are the cars commuting to work in the morning and tucked promptly into garages after five, when the curtains and house blinds are promptly drawn closed.

The afternoon slips by, and the light changes in our window. At long last, the mailman—or mail carrier as I'm told to call him (Thank you so much for enlightening me, Doris)—finishes delivering the mail on our street. I wave, but if he sees me, he does not let on. People these days—so rude.

"What?"

I ask Harold, who's glowering at me from his chair. "I told you before. I'm not going back to Doris's today. I am not her slave. The tuna can wait."

And so it does. I find ways to make the hours pass, until at long last the day is done. In the late evening, I help Harold up the stairs, positioning him on his pillow beside me. I give him a kiss good night, then I turn over and drift off to sleep. The next morning, when I'm awake and dressed, I set Harold up comfortably in his easy chair in the living room. Only when the clock reads 9:00 a.m. do I decide it's time.

"I'm off to Doris and Bob's,"

I announce.

First, I water her hydrangeas out back, then go find the tuna can in the fridge and wash it out. Doris keeps her garbage bins on the front porch instead of hidden away in the garage, which means they offend my eyes every time I look out my picture window.

As I set the can in the bin, I'm surprised by what—or rather who—is staring back at me. On a labeled jar in the recycling box is a familiar monocle-wearing, cane-toting figure—MR. PEANUT. I pick up the jar, twist off the lid, and sniff. No question—fresh peanuts. I drop the jar, lock Doris's front door, and head home.

"You're not going to believe this,"

I tell Harold the moment I'm inside. We both just sit there, quietly trying to figure out a reasonable explanation for why a man who is deathly allergic to peanuts would have an empty jar of peanuts in his recycling box.

"Now let's not worry ourselves,"

I say after a time. "I'll just ask Doris once she's back."

The day passes slowly. A few cars rumble by; the mail "carrier"

ignores me as usual; and before I know it, the streetlamps turn on, illuminating the sidewalk, and with it, Doris's dark and empty house.

"Time for bed,"

I say. I help Harold to our bedroom and tuck him in beside me. I kiss him and wish him sweet dreams, then switch off the light, drifting into a fitful sleep.

The next morning, I get Harold set up as usual downstairs. I head across the street, water the hydrangeas, then do an interior house check. On the credenza in the living room, the framed photo of Doris and Bob in their flamenco outfits catches my eye. Bob is looking right at me, his face pale and sickly. And that's when the thought crosses my mind. It's just a silly notion, really—one of those crazy what-ifs that is too impossible to entertain. But then I look at Bob's face again—the dark circles under his eyes, the wan look. I think about the patio and how I found peanuts there, crunched under my feet. And then the empty peanut jar in the bin ...

Now normally, I would never snoop around someone else's house, least of all a neighbor's, but to relieve myself of all doubt, and for safety's sake, I decide to have just the quickest look around.

My feet lead me down the hall to Doris and Bob's master bedroom. The door is open, and the bed is made, with a scarlet coverlet that looks like something out of a James Bond film. The wall behind the bed features a mural of wild horses, leaving no question about who chose the bedroom decor. The closet door is slightly ajar, and even at this angle, I can see Bob's flamenco costume inside. Those ridiculous frilled sleeves have no place on a man, and the black pants beside them look as stretched and exhausted as Bob himself.

I open the closet wide. The men's clothes account for a tiny fraction of what's in there, while the rest of the space is devoted to Doris—flashy dresses in rainbow colors, a dizzying array of wholly improper garb for a seventy-five-year-old woman. Below the clothes are shoes—mostly hers, except for two pairs of men's loafers up front. At first, Bob's shoes appear dusty, but as I bend, I see it's not dust on them but a gritty powder. A deodorizer perhaps? The last thing I want is to sniff Bob's shoe, but I do it. Then I rub some granules between my thumb and index finger. I smell them too. I even put a tiny particle to my tongue to make sure my senses aren't failing me. They are not. Peanuts—ground peanuts. In Bob's shoes.

I hurtle backward as if bitten by a cobra. It's then I notice the same dusty particles on the carpet by the bed. I bend for closer inspection. No question about it—peanuts. I throw back the lurid satin coverlet and shake the pillows from their cases, only to watch as a dusting of beige crumbs cascades onto the scarlet sheets.

My eyes scan the room—two dressers, his and hers. I open the top drawer, which contains Bob's socks—taupe, gray, beige. I rifle through to the bottom until my fingertips palpate whole peanuts hidden in the back corners. I open the next drawer—Bob's tighty-whities. I pull the entire thing out and dump it on the carpet as peanut dust fills the air. The next drawer—men's cardigans, which I throw onto the floor. Poof! A cloud of peanut dust rises. Next, I ransack the walk-in closet, tossing Bob's dress shirts out, shaking out the breast pockets—every last one filled with peanut particles.

Trembling, I don't stop until I've checked all of Bob's garments, leaving them strewn on the bed and floor of the bedroom where Bob has slept, unsuspecting, beside his wife, Doris, every night for about fifty years. I collapse on the bed, short of breath even though I'm not at all allergic, but the scent of peanuts in the room is suffocating. I hobble out of the bedroom and head for the sliding back door.

I'm standing in Doris's back garden, panting in front of the plot of hydrangeas. That's when it occurs to me. No, it cannot be. But I can't stop staring at the strange six-foot-by-two-foot mounded garden plot. I never actually saw Bob in the passenger seat beside Doris as she drove off. What if he never made it into the car? What if he never left the house at all?

No. It cannot be. I'm jumping to insane conclusions. I'm not thinking straight. My heart thumps as I rush up the steps to the sliding door and race through Doris and Bob's house, trailing muddy footprints, but I don't care. I lock her door behind me and rush home.

Once safe inside, I head to the living room, where I stand breathlessly in front of Harold. "Peanuts everywhere,"

I gasp between labored breaths. "Doris—what if she wanted him dead all along? I think maybe she's gone and done it. I think she killed Bob."

The rest of the day passes slowly. My mind won't stop racing. I can't sit down. I pace in front of my picture window. Doris and Bob are due back tomorrow morning, but if I'm right, only one of them will return. I think back to how Doris ran an index finger across her neck, suggesting Bob was a goner unless he found a passion for flamenco. I thought she meant divorce, but what if that's not what she meant at all? What if Bob is already done for, buried in her backyard?

Oh, poor Bob. Poor allergic, four-eyed, asthmatic Bob. He was bland and boring in

every way, a terrible match for Doris, but he wasn’t a bad man. Doris always wanted to transform him into someone he could never be. He didn’t stand a chance. Why she didn’t divorce him years ago, I’ll never understand. But is it really possible she took matters into her own hands? Even as I say it, I’m filled with doubt. It cannot be. Doris is a right pain in the ass, a narcissist if there ever was one, but she cannot be a murderer. I’m getting ahead of myself. I must be. But there’s only one way to know for sure.

On any given day, the hours of my old age pass far too slowly for my liking, but on this day, time is even more relentlessly slow. To pass the time, I decide to ring my niece. When my sister died ten years ago, Fiona became my last living relative, and sometimes it’s just nice to hear her voice.

The phone rings ... and rings ... and at last she picks up.

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“Fiona! It’s your aunt Marge. How are you, dear? How are the kids?”

“Aunt Marge, it’s two in the morning,”

Fiona replies. “You remember we’re living in Denmark now, right?”

“Oh dear, I forgot about the time change again, didn’t I.”

“Listen, I’ll call you another time, okay?”

“Yes, dear,”

I say. “I’m sorry.”

I hang up, feeling ashamed of myself. Of course Fiona’s in Denmark now. And of course it’s hours ahead of us. How could I be so foolish?

I distract myself with a book, and it helps. When the streetlamps turn on, I’m filled with relief, though there are still hours more to while away before I can make my move.

When it’s bedtime, I help Harold upstairs. I tuck him into bed as usual and kiss him good night, then I wait a few more hours, tossing restlessly beside him, counting the cracks in the ceiling, hoping to find a reasonable explanation for Doris’s house to be filled with hidden peanuts. How long was she slowly poisoning Bob under everyone’s noses, and to what end?

The clock on my bedside table reads 3:00 a.m. Doris will return from Spain midmorning, so this is my only chance. I slip out of bed and get dressed in all black. I tiptoe to Doris's house, make my way through the kitchen, and open the sliding door. The motion-sensor lights switch on immediately—something I never considered. In the house behind Doris and Bob's, a light flicks on—probably someone coincidentally making a nighttime bathroom trip before stumbling groggily back to bed.

Once the neighbor's house goes dark, I make my way to Bob's shed and locate a shovel. I set to work, digging up the hydrangeas, then stabbing the shovel into the heavy, wet earth below. I dig and I dig. This is no job for a seventy-five-year-old woman with bad knees and a fluttery heart. It's not long before beads of sweat are streaming down my forehead. Despite the stabbing pains in my joints, I keep digging, until suddenly my shovel crashes against something that won't yield. I kneel in the dank muck, hoping to find an old brick or a stone, but when my fingers clear the dirt, I'm horrified by what glows in the shadowy light—a stark, white bone.

I stagger backward, then rush back into Doris's house, shovel in hand. I'm hyperventilating. I can't see straight. I flick on all the lights, leaving muddy smears everywhere I step. I head to the living room, but my wet shoes slip on the carpet, and I fall on the floor with a thump. The shovel leaves my hands, twists in the air, then ricochets into Doris's picture window with a startling, high-pitched crash. The glass bursts into a million pieces, falling all over the credenza and taking out the photo of Doris and Bob in their flamenco outfits.

I brush the shards of glass off me and get back to my feet. Across the street, some lights flick on. The neighborhood hounds start to bark, and a man—my next-door neighbor—comes out onto his front porch, dressed in a housecoat.

I rush out Doris's stupid yellow door and call out, "Everything's fine! Just a bit of broken glass."

“Marge?”

he says, squinting. “What are you doing at Doris’s?”

“Watering the plants!”

I yell back. “Nothing to worry about. Go back to bed!”

I watch as my neighbor pulls his housecoat tight, then heads back into his house, appeased for now.

I sink into Doris’s couch. Think, I tell myself. Think. Should I call 911? And if so, what do I say? Hi, I’ve just dug up my neighbor, Bob, whose wife buried him in their backyard after poisoning him with peanuts? I’ll sound like a lunatic. No, I have to pause, think things through ...

I stare out Doris’s broken window, where the first rays of light are streaming up over the rooftops. I’m so tired, worn out. I rest my heavy head in my hands.

That’s when the banging starts, making me jump halfway out of my skin. Someone’s pounding on the front door.

“Open up!”

I hear a man’s booming voice. “Open the door!”

I stay stock still, hoping the yelling will stop, that whoever it is will just go away and leave me to gather my thoughts.

“We can see you in there, ma’am. We’re coming in!”

The front door opens, and two burly police officers waltz in. They survey the scene—the mucky footprints, the glass shards everywhere, a shovel on the carpet, the sliding door open to the backyard, and me, an old woman covered in mud, shaking on the sofa.

“Ma’am, we got a call about a suspected break and enter. Do you live here?”

“No,”

I say breathlessly. “I’m Doris and Bob’s neighbor.”

“Did you break into their house?”

“No. They keep a key under the welcome mat,”

I explain.

“Your neighbors gave you a key?”

“Not exactly,” I say.

The officers look at the broken window, then at each other.

“And where are Doris and Bob?”

one of the officers asks.

“In Spain, dancing flamenco. I’ve been looking after things.”

“Been doing a hell of a job,”

says the other officer as he scans the mud-caked floors.

“You don’t understand. Bob’s in the backyard!”

I say, and I can’t help it. I burst into tears. As I blubber uncontrollably, one of the officers walks over to the sliding doors, looks out at the garden.

“No Bob out here, Sergeant. But the yard’s a torn-up mess.”

“Doris said Bob went to Spain with her,”

I say through sobs. “But he never left this house. He’s buried out back! And peanuts are everywhere.”

“Ma’am,”

says the sergeant as he steps toward me. “It seems to me you’re not doing so well. And your neighbors were worried this might be a break-and-enter situation, or at the very least, someone causing mischief. Why don’t we go to the station, and you can explain everything a bit more clearly there, okay?”

I can’t believe my ears. Nothing makes any sense. “You think I’m the one causing mischief? It’s Doris you want, and for something much worse than that!”

The other officer, who’d marched down the hall, now returns to the living room. “She ransacked the bedroom too. Clothes everywhere.”

“Okay, ma’am. Let me give you a hand up. You’re coming with us.”

I’m in the precinct downtown. I fell asleep on a chair in an interview room, and now the sergeant has left. If I’ve known a deeper exhaustion, I can’t recall when. Every

sinew in my body aches. I'm caked in mud. There's a Styrofoam cup of cold coffee on a table beside me. The sergeant brought it earlier, but I couldn't drink it.

He spent a long time with me in this windowless room. He asked a lot of questions, and I answered as best I could.

"Like I said, I'm Doris and Bob's neighbor. I live across the street. My name is Marge."

He asked how old I was.

"Same as Doris—seventy-five."

I tried to make him understand what's really gone on here, how I've watched Doris from across the street for five decades, and how beyond being a nosy, grade A narcissist, she also murdered her husband. Several times, I explained that I was digging in her backyard for Bob because peanut particles led me there. "Bob's allergic,"

I explained. "And now he's in the ground. You'll find his bones if you check."

The sergeant asked me why I broke the window, saying something about forced entry. I tried to explain it was an accident, but he didn't buy it. He wrote something on his notepad, then stared at me vacantly.

"Is there someone we can call?"

he asked. "A family member who can vouch for you?"

"There's my husband,"

I said. “But he’s no help in the state he’s in. And there’s my niece, but she’s all the way in Denmark.”

I realized then the ugly truth—that I have no one, not a single person, except ...

“Doris,”

I said. “She’s due back from Spain in a couple of hours. If you wait for her, you’ll see for yourself that Bob’s not with her because she buried him in the yard !”

The officer snapped his notepad shut. “Okay, Marge,”

he replied. “You wait here.”

And that’s what I’ve been doing, waiting in this room, hoping the sergeant will return full of apologies, then thank me for keeping a close neighborhood watch that led to the discovery of a heinous crime.

The sergeant does return. In fact, he’s standing in the doorway right now. He moves to one side so I can see who’s behind him. It’s her—Doris. She’s dressed in a red-and-black polka-dot top with puffed sleeves. She’s sun kissed, and I can smell her awful perfume from here.

“Bloody hell, Marge. What happened to you?”

she asks. “You look like a drowned mole. And my house has been ransacked.”

“Where’s Bob?”

I ask. “How do you explain that one, Doris? He didn’t come back with you, did he?”

“No, he did not,”

Doris replies matter-of-factly. “He stayed in Spain.”

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“He’s not in Spain!”

I shout. “He’s under your goddamn hydrangeas! I dug up his bones!”

“You dug up Princess, our old cocker spaniel,”

Doris says. “Bob buried her there years ago.”

Doris turns to the officer, all doe eyed, her false eyelashes fluttering. “She’s not quite right in the mental department,” she says.

“She mentioned a husband,”

the sergeant replies.

“Harold,”

I say, insinuating myself back into the conversation. “My husband’s name is Harold.”

“Should we call him?”

the sergeant asks.

“Marge,”

says Doris before I can answer. “You know perfectly well that Harold is in an urn. He died two years ago, and you’re still not over it.”

She turns to the sergeant. “Every time I bring up the idea of a proper burial for her husband instead of leaving his ashes on his easy chair in the living room, she has a hissy fit and changes the subject.”

It’s the only true thing she’s said so far, but I suddenly see how things look to the sergeant, who’s eyeing me with a mix of pity and disdain. What does he know about loneliness and loss? He has no idea what it feels like to lose almost everyone around you, including the person you love most in this world. Is it so wrong to want to keep them close for a while longer?

“Old age,”

Doris whispers to him. “Soft in the head.”

“I can hear you,”

I say, “and I’m perfectly sound of mind.”

“Let’s have a chat outside,”

the sergeant suggests to Doris. “Marge, you wait right here. We’ll be back soon,”

he adds loudly, as if I’m deaf.

When the two of them return a few minutes later, it’s the sergeant who speaks first. “Your neighbor, Doris, is a very forgiving lady. She’s decided not to press charges despite what you did to her house. In the absence of other living family members, I’m releasing you into her care. She’ll take you to a doctor to have you assessed. We both believe you may be experiencing dementia. Do you understand? You need to get looked after.”

“Dementia?”

I say. “I don’t have dementia! What I have is a murderous neighbor who killed her husband because he lacked a passion for flamenco. And now she’ll want me dead too!”

“There, there,”

says Doris. “I’m only trying to help.”

Before I can say anything else, the sergeant has me standing, holding me by the arm, escorting me through the precinct and out the front door, with Doris trailing behind, flirting with every male officer we pass.

The sergeant leads me all the way to Doris’s candy-apple-red sedan in the parking lot. Doris chirps the locks open, and the sergeant urges me to sit in Doris’s passenger seat. With no other choice, I do so, my legs nearly giving out from under me.

“Easy now,”

the sergeant says as he reaches around to put on my seat belt.

“I can do that myself,”

I say, grabbing the buckle and jamming it into the slot.

“Good!”

says the sergeant, like he’s praising a toddler.

Doris lingers, leaning on the open car door, preening for the sergeant. “Thank you very much, Officer. You’ve been so kind and understanding to poor old Marge. You and your boys should do a calendar to raise funds for the precinct. I’d buy one. You’re all so darn handsome.”

The sergeant chuckles and eyes his boots. “Thank you, ma’am. You’re lucky your neighbor is such a Good Samaritan, Marge,”

he says to me.

I refuse to dignify this with a response.

“I’ll take good care of her,”

Doris says. Then she closes my door and click-clacks her way to the driver’s side, hops in, and revs her engine.

She waves goodbye to the sergeant, then drives out of the parking lot. We’re silent for the entire ten minutes it takes to get to our street, where she lurches the car into a sudden park in my driveway.

“Aren’t you getting out?” she asks.

“Doris,”

I hiss, “you killed your husband. We both know it. You weakened him at home, poisoning him slowly through exposure to peanuts. The only part I got wrong is where you killed him, but I know now. You killed him in Spain. Admit it.”

Doris sighs, then taps her perfectly manicured fingernails on the steering wheel. “I told you before, Marge. If you don’t live life to the fullest, you deserve to die.”

She smiles then, a smile so sinister it chills me to my core.

“People will figure out the truth eventually,”

I say. “Because Bob isn’t ever coming back.”

Doris shrugs. “True,”

she says. “He’s not returning, but who’s going to care? He’s just another old white guy shacking up with a younger woman abroad. Something I’ve learned through the years is that a few compliments, greased palms, and pretty tears shed at the right moment is all it takes to get away with anything, even murder.”

“No one will believe you!” I shout.

“They will, Marge. Come on,”

she says, “let’s get you inside.”

Spry and appearing well rested despite a long flight home, she hops out of the car while I struggle, my legs jiggling from exhaustion. She offers an arm to help me up my porch steps, but I push it away.

“Need help, Doris?”

I hear behind me.

It’s the mailman—mail “carrier”—looking on from the sidewalk.

“Aren’t you just the sweetest young man,”

Doris drawls. “Not to worry, honey. I’ve got this. Marge here had a rough spell this morning, but I’ll fix her up good!”

The mailman nods and saunters away.

How dare she. And how dare he. I’ve waved at him every day, for months and years, and he’s never so much as acknowledged my existence, yet he knows Doris by name?

I make it to my front door unassisted. “Goodbye, Doris,” I say.

“Oh, this is not goodbye. Not quite yet,”

she replies. “Funny—years and years of being watched and judged by your neighbors, and then one day, you realize you just can’t take it anymore. Shame about poor Harold, falling off a ladder the way he did, smacking his head on your garage floor. Pity, too—you finding him there, bled out and dead. A terrible accident.”

She turns then, click-clacking her kitten heels down my stairs and marching across the street to her home.

I watch her, a cold dread spreading in my stomach.

I go inside and lock the door behind me. I collapse into my easy chair by the window.

I look over at the urn on the easy chair. “Harold,”

I say. “I owe you an apology. I really thought it was an accident. I’m so sorry. I didn’t know she did you in.”

The silver urn glints and shines, reflecting my exhausted face back at me.

“Well,”

I say, “I guess this means I’m next.”