

WHAT ARE NEIGHBORS FOR?

by  
Grady Smith

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A One-Act in Two Scenes

CHARACTERS:

Theodore Gervaise Gervaise  
Annie Walker  
Chaz Walker

Vivian Dexter  
Harry Prince  
Magdalena Malpaghini

*SCENE: Condo living room. Occasional furniture. On a low pedestal in front of the sliding glass doors to the balcony, a statue of the Buddha, meditating.*

*AT RISE: Some little distance from the Buddha, THEODORE GERVAISE GERVAISE also sits meditating, with his feet tucked crosswise into the crook of his knees, eyes closed, breathing slowly and deeply. He sounds a quiet, drawn-out ohm on his exhalations. He wears a shorty smoking jacket or kimono sort of thing, with assertively color-coordinated briefs. Toward the end of his third ohm, a knock at the door.*

TGG

*(holds position, eyes closed)*

Enter.

ANNIE

*(comes in from hallway)*

Hi. I live in the apartment next door, and I just thought I'd come by and welcome you to... Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt your meditation. I'll...

TGG

It's all right.

ANNIE

No, I'll...

TGG

Actually, you're just in time. My foot's asleep, and I can never get out of this damned lotus position without help or a crowbar.

ANNIE

Oh—

TGG

Could you give me a hand here?

ANNIE

Sure.

TGG

Pull my left foot out of this bloody tangle, will you?

ANNIE

Got it. (*grabs wrong foot*)

TGG

My other left.

ANNIE

Oh! (*laughs, gestures that the right foot is on the left side and vice versa*)

TGG

Quickly please.

(*Camille:*)

Everything is growing dim.

ANNIE

Right. (*Pulls TGG's left foot out of the crook of his right knee & helps him stand up*)

TGG

Oh. Stiff.

(*slaps left leg a couple of times*)

Wake up, fool.

(*puts hands on hips & stretches, arching backwards & flashing ANNIE with his briefs. Straightens, notices her staring at his underwear*)

Oh, don't you just love them?

(*Coquettishly pulls back a corner of his kimono bottoms*)

M.H. adores decorator briefs. Aren't they sassy?

ANNIE

Adorable.

TGG

(*hopefully*)

Am I shocking you?

ANNIE

Just because you're flaunting it? Don't write me off that fast.

TGG

(*impressed*)

A point for you.

ANNIE

Well, I am a Volvo liberal.

TGG

Haven't you heard? Volvos are out now. Saabs are in.

ANNIE

Not in our parking space.

TGG

A self-deprecating zinger. Nice!

ANNIE

I can parry with the best of them, but I don't do thrusting very well. I'm not into blood sports. Sometimes I wish I was.

TGG

Oh, I am. M.H. says it's my defining vice, and I have a lot of them.

ANNIE

A rapier wit, eh?

TGG

And a rapier tongue to go with it.

ANNIE

I'll keep it in mind. Who's M.H.?

TGG

My Hero. AKA my significant other, Harry Prince. M.H. started out being My Harry, but early on it segued Into My Hero. As in person of heroic proportions.

ANNIE

A defining characteristic, eh?

TGG

Definitely. But I interrupted you. You live next door and you just wanted to welcome us.

ANNIE

Oh—right. My husband Chaz and I are having a few people from the building over tonight at seven for cocktails and munchies. We thought you and M.H. might want to join us for an ice breaker.

So it's Chaz and—?

TGG

Annie. Chaz and Annie Walker.

ANNIE

Little Orphan Annie. Got it.

TGG

Oh, please—

ANNIE

Not to worry.

TGG

Ever since that gooey musical—

ANNIE

It's just a pseudo-mnemonic device so I don't lose track of your identity in a bourbon blur. We'd love to come, Annie, and thank you for asking.

TGG

Very informal. And you are...?

ANNIE

Oopsy. I'm Theodore Gervaise Gervaise.

TGG

Theodore...?

ANNIE

The first Gervaise is for my grandfather, who ran a male brothel in Paris. A long, sordid story.

TGG

Be sure and tell me tonight, when you're in a bourbon blur.

ANNIE

And the second Gervaise is for my father. At least that's what I was told.

TGG

By your mother?

ANNIE

If that's who she was.

TGG

ANNIE

The plot complexifies.

TGG

Complexified plots are best, and I've got one. We all lived on the top floor of the, uh-- establishment. Talk about your liberal education. But I digress—Theodore...

ANNIE

....Gervaise Gervaise. Got it.

TGG

But you can call me madam.

ANNIE

You're kidding, right?

TGG

Of course. It's just an Irving Berlin one-liner.

ANNIE

But *Theodore*... How do I remember...? Ooh! Got it! Teddy Bear!

TGG

Oh, please.

ANNIE

It's just a pseudo-mnemonic device.

TGG

Don't hit me again.

ANNIE

No more orphans?

TGG

That's a big one to let go of.

ANNIE

How about if we strike a truce?

TGG

For you my dear, an unconditional surrender.

ANNIE

*(not quite trusting him)*  
Really?

TGG

Believe it.

ANNIE

You can't fool me. You only surrender when you're invited to a party.

TGG

Caught me, you're very good. You know, I think we're going to make excellent neighbors.

ANNIE

Now that you mention it, I think so too. And it occurs to me, you might just be able to help me.

TGG

Moi?

ANNIE

Tell the truth now.

TGG

What?

ANNIE

How bitchy can you really get?

TGG

That's a very personal question.

ANNIE

Needs a very personal answer.

TGG

*Je suis une absolute garce.*

ANNIE

I don't have a clue what that means, but it sounds like just what I need.

TGG

What do you have in mind?

ANNIE

I have a problem--Magdalena Malpaghini.

TGG

With a name like that, I'm intrigued already.

ANNIE

If you think you can handle her, I'll ask her over tonight. But she's got a tongue that can slash you to ribbons at thirty paces.

TGG

Not me, she can't. I parry and thrust, remember? But why bring her up in a chat about bitchiness?

ANNIE

She's got the hots for Chaz, and I want you to slash her to ribbons. Enough so she'll stop playing her little games.

TGG

Aaah.

ANNIE

Sometimes he and I will be playing tennis right out on the court there. And she'll be sitting on her balcony with binoculars, checking out his—his tennis shorts.

TGG

Maybe she's looking at you, little *chat*.

ANNIE

Not based on her track record. Do you know why your condo came available when it did?

TGG

Ah—let me guess. The previous occupants broke up housekeeping.

ANNIE

More like smashed it to pieces.

TGG

Abruptly then?

ANNIE

And if you're into geometry, think triangle.

TGG

With this Magdalena person as the hypotenuse. Has she actually gotten her sweaty little hands on Chaz?

ANNIE

I don't think so. We're talking preemptive here. Can you do it?

TGG

Oh, my, yes—quite easily done.

ANNIE

She's formidable.

TGG

*(preens)*

Think Sherman's march to the sea.

ANNIE

Now don't pillage and burn the whole party. This is a very specific contract, okay?

TGG

No one will know what's happening till they trip over the body.

ANNIE

Excellent.

TGG

But what do I get for all my hard work?

ANNIE

How about brunch for you and M.H. Sunday morning?

TGG

Done.

ANNIE

Good! Oh, I feel so much better. Now I'm off to cook, and wrap bandages.

*(at the door)*

Au revoir.

TGG

Plus tard.

*(ANNIE exits. TGG picks up the cordless & dials)*

Harry Prince, please.

*(pause)*

TGG (*continued*)

Well, hello love. How's My Hero? Good.

*(pause)*

Oh, your Teddy Bear's fine too.

*(pulls waste band of his briefs away from his stomach & looks in)*

He says to tell you he's thinking about you.

*(pause. Chuckles)*

But to the point. We've got a cocktail invite tonight at seven, the next-door neighbors.

Don't know about him, but she's nice. Got a good wit, awash in hetero bonhomie.

*(crosses to meditation place and reassumes lotus position)*

Your basic Person Of Straight Good Will. Oh—and I've got work to do tonight, too.

*(pause)*

In my guise as sharpest tongue in the west, couldn't you guess? I'll tell you all about it when you get home.

*(pause)*

You too, sweetie. Kiss kiss.

*(makes a kissing sound into the receiver and puts the phone down beside him.*

*Presses thumbs and forefingers together to form two circles, and lays hands on knees, palms up, completing the lotus. Closes eyes. After a moment opens them again, smiling)*

Oh, Buddha—

*(he cracks his knuckles)*

This is going to be fun.

*(hands resume their position and he sounds his first ohm, which segues to a chuckle)*

CURTAIN

SCENE TWO

*SCENE: ANNIE & CHAZ WALKER's living room. Occasional furniture, including a small table for liquor, mix, glasses etc. A larger table for munchies.*

*Entrance door. Hallway to the bedrooms. Another door to the kitchen.*

*AT RISE: CHAZ, in a frilly little apron kind of thing, enters from the kitchen with a tray of glasses. Puts them on the small table with the booze. Phone rings and HE answers it.*

CHAZ

Hello. Oh, hi, Marge.

*(ANNIE enters with snacks & puts them on the large table)*

Sure. Hang on.

*(to ANNIE)*

Hey, Hon. Marge wants to know what she can bring.

ANNIE

Her appetite and George.

CHAZ

*(in phone)*

Just bring your husband and come ravenous.

*(pause)*

No, really. Everybody offered to help cater, gratefully declined. You'll never guess what Magdalena wanted to bring.

ANNIE

*(to HERSELF)*

The antlers from her last stag.

CHAZ

*(to ANNIE)*

What?

*(into phone)*

Yes, Magdalena Malpaghini. Yes, she's coming too.

ANNIE

*(to HERSELF)*

Her latest next-door-neighbor husband, stuffed and mounted.

CHAZ

Oh Marge, you're not serious, are you?

ANNIE

*(to HERSELF)*

She's got a full-time taxidermist on staff.

CHAZ

Well, I'm sorry to hear that. And uh, my best to George.

ANNIE

Another cancellation?

CHAZ

I don't understand it. I mention Magdalena and the bottom falls out.

ANNIE

That's three couples now. And all three times we talked to the wives—what a coincidence.

CHAZ

You'd think Magdalena had a communicable disease or something.

ANNIE

Wouldn't you.

CHAZ

The only ones coming now are her, the boys next door, and Vivian Dexter. Viv the vague.

ANNIE

What am I going to do with three pounds of sweet-and-sour meatballs?

CHAZ

Kindergarten croquet?

ANNIE

That's excessively weird.

*(the doorbell rings)*

You've just been saved by the bell.

*(opens door. VIVIAN enters with a platter of mixed raw veggies under plastic wrap, and a bowl of dip, also covered. Takes them straight to the munchies table.)*

VIVIAN

You're going to just hate me, Annie, but I brought a little something anyway— some raw veggies for scoopers and a wonderful spinach dip.

CHAZ

Well, thanks, Viv.

ANNIE

Dip.

VIVIAN

Yes. Oh, it's so nice of you to throw a little soiree for the two bachelors next door.

CHAZ

Can I get you a drink?

VIVIAN

Triple bourbon neat.

CHAZ

*(unphased)*  
The usual, eh?

VIVIAN

No ice.

CHAZ

*(pouring)*  
Have I ever?

VIVIAN

I'm sure the boys know how lucky they are to move here.

CHAZ

*(gives HER a large glass of straight bourbon)*  
Here you go.

VIVIAN

Although you'd think there'd be covenants, wouldn't you?

ANNIE

Good heavens, Vivian. The building manager's one too.

VIVIAN

But she's a she.

Sure is. CHAZ

I'm confused. (*drinks*) VIVIAN

Sure are. ANNIE

Let me think about this. VIVIAN  
(*holds out glass*)  
Top me off, Chaz?

Love to. CHAZ  
(*to ANNIE*)  
Gonna be one of those nights.  
(*to VIVIAN*)  
Come on, Viv. Bring your glass.  
(THEY head for the bar. The *doorbell rings*)

Got it. ANNIE  
(*opens door. HARRY PRINCE & TGG enter*)  
Hello. You must be Harry.

Right you are. HARRY

So good to meet you. ANNIE  
(*THEY shake hands*)

(*At the bar--the light dawns*) VIVIAN  
Oh! She's a lesbian!  
(HARRY looks ANNIE up and down incredulously)

(*to HARRY*) TGG  
Not this one.

ANNIE  
And not Vivian, the vastly vacuous. Pay no attention to her unless she asks you to refill her glass. Hi, Ted.

(SHE brushes cheeks with TGG)

TGG  
Thanks for having us, Annie. Very thoughtful of you.

CHAZ  
Hi, I'm Chaz Walker.  
(THEY exchange hellos)

TGG  
Love your outfit.

CHAZ  
(realizes HE's still wearing the apron. Takes it off & stuffs it under a sofa cushion)  
Trust me, it's not a fashion statement.

ANNIE  
And this is Vivian Dexter from upstairs.

HARRY  
I'm Harry Prince.

VIVIAN  
But you're so handsome. What a waste.

HARRY  
(glancing slyly at TGG)  
Oh, I'm not wasted.

VIVIAN  
What?

TGG  
I make sure of that.

VIVIAN  
I don't understand. (drinks)

ANNIE  
No.

VIVIAN  
Let me think about this.  
(holds out glass)  
Top me off, Chaz?

Love to. CHAZ

How about you two? ANNIE

Red wine for me. HARRY

Club soda. A wedge of lime if you've got it. TGG

Yup, got it. Come on, Viv.  
*(CHAZ & VIVIAN go to the bar)* CHAZ

ANNIE  
And feel free to refill without being supervised. Although Chaz and I won't have that much to do. Three couples cancelled when they heard you-know-who was coming.

TGG  
Good heavens. She must be able to kill with a look.

HARRY  
A la Medusa.

TGG  
Snakes for hair?

ANNIE  
No, damn it. Darkly beautiful actually, when she's in full regalia—which she will be tonight. Dark, mysterious, and dangerous—a la Mata Hari. Anyway, my take. Husbands, on the other hand, have this overpowering urge to protect her and feed her bread crumbs. Right up until she devours them.

HARRY  
Any vulnerabilities?

ANNIE  
She's older than the hills, but how much I don't know. Her plastic surgery must have cost a fortune.

HARRY  
Well off then.

ANNIE

Three marriages, three divorces, three substantial engagement rings deployed all over the place. God knows what she managed to build into the pre-nups.

TGG

So lots of mileage, eh? That's good to know.

*(CHAZ has refilled VIVIAN's glass. Brings the wine & soda as HE & VIVIAN rejoin the others)*

CHAZ

Here you are.

*(gives HARRY HIS wine)*

HARRY

Thank you.

CHAZ

And your club soda.

ANNIE

Nothing stronger?

TGG

Need a clear head for the Magdalena wars.

VIVIAN

*(to HARRY, sharing the joke SHE now seems to understand. Pokes HIM slyly.)*  
So you don't go to waste, eh?

CHAZ

I explained the facts of life to her.

HARRY

Exposed.

VIVIAN

Oh, you slyboots, you.

TGG

We're so embarrassed. What else could possibly happen?

*(doorbell rings)*

That answers that.

*(ANNIE heads for the door. CHAZ cuts HER off)*

I've got it. CHAZ

Wait. Did you say Magdalena wars? VIVIAN

Loud and clear. TGG

I don't understand. *(drinks)* VIVIAN

No. ANNIE

You will. Just keep your hard hat handy. HARRY

*(ANNIE opens the apartment door and MAGDALENA makes HER entrance. SHE is in Mata Hari black, overdressed and overcoifed compared to the other women, yet it feels right for HER.)*

Whoa. Lovely, Magdalena. You look like you're dining with royalty. CHAZ

*(French accent)*  
That is so sweet of you, Chaz.  
*(kisses HIM on the cheek)*  
Thank you. MAGDALENA

What can I get you to drink? CHAZ

*(lays HER hand on his forearm)*  
Pernod and bitter lemon.  
*(to HARRY & TGG)*  
And you two must be the guests of honor. Welcome. MAGDALENA

Thanks very much. I'm Harry Prince. HARRY

I would have brought a very special dish for the buffet in your honor. Oysters Paris. But Chaz forbade me. MAGDALENA

CHAZ

Oh, I love oysters.

(ANNIE surreptitiously kicks HIM)

Ow.

MAGDALENA

When the oysters are taken with champagne, young gentlemen such as yourselves are suddenly possessed of a boldness and stamina that is awesome to see.

TGG

If Harry had any more stamina than he does now, I'd be an invalid.

MAGDALENA

I have often seen these oysters tested under the most demanding circumstances.

TGG

I'm sure you'd be *very* demanding.

MAGDALENA

I beg your pardon?

TGG

Your requirements must be quite—intense.

MAGDALENA

Young man--

CHAZ

Speaking of food, Magdalena, can I get you something to eat? Sweet-and-sour meatballs? Spinach dip?

ANNIE

Bread crumbs?

MAGDALENA

Perhaps later, darling. When the pernod has brought an appetite.

TGG

Who for?

ANNIE

Here we go.

MAGDALENA

*(turns and regards HIM coolly)*  
You lack subtlety.

TGG

Subtlety, I'm afraid, would have little chance of penetrating.

MAGDALENA

Young man—I have a reasonably quick mind.

TGG

But to reach it, subtlety would have to penetrate—  
*(something quite distasteful:)*  
--your skin.

MAGDALENA

*(bridling)*  
And what is wrong with my skin?

TGG

Oh, it's lovely actually. For the Jurassic.

CHAZ

Oh shit.

ANNIE

What have I done?

MAGDALENA

*(smiling coolly)*  
Of course you realize this means war.

VIVIAN

*(clarity at last)*  
The Magdalena war!

TGG

*(to MAGDALENA)*  
You finally noticed.

VIVIAN

*(delighted)*  
More bourbon!

HARRY

Ted, maybe you--

MAGDALENA

(to HARRY)  
You are unfortunately too late. Your *friend* is doomed.

(to TGG)  
But we have not been formally introduced. I am Maria Magdalena Malpaghini--

TGG

My my my.

MAGDALENA

--Countess of Bari, Foggia and Altamura.

HARRY

I'm a Prince.

TGG

Was the title part of a divorce settlement?

MAGDALENA

(offers her hand to be kissed. TGG takes it)  
It was. Along with other things.

TGG

(still holding HER hand)  
A most impressive collection of diamonds, Countess.

VIVIAN

(TGG kisses MAGDALENA'S hand)  
Goodness, yes.

ANNIE

(to VIVIAN)  
Hush!

MAGDALENA

They are just a small part of my numerous souvenirs.

TGG

They must mean so much to you. I'm sure you've had them since they were little lumps of coal.

MAGDALENA

(longsuffering)  
Sir. With whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?

Theodore Gervaise Gervaise. TGG

(*genuinely startled*)  
What? MAGDALENA

Late of Paris, London and New York. TGG

(*back in control*)  
I heard once of a young lad named Gervaise. He was raised in a *maison close* in Paris—he was a bordello brat. MAGDALENA

Oh my God. HARRY

You're bluffing! TGG

Am I? His mother was virtually the only woman in that unusual establishment. MAGDALENA

She was the only woman. TGG

All that work and no one else to help. (*drinks*) VIVIAN

The woman you speak of was the mother of that stripling lad, Gervaise. But there was one other woman in the house. MAGDALENA

You lie, Countess. TGG

I do not, Monsieur. Before the second lady took up residence on the top floor, the young lad reached an age and condition which qualified him to participate in the activities of the lower floors. And his grandfather wished him to, I was told, to earn his keep and to learn the family business, as it were. But it was a prospect apparently repugnant to him, for he fled headlong from the only home he had ever known rather than enter into such servitude. MAGDALENA

TGG

So that's why he wouldn't know about the second woman.

MAGDALENA

Exactly. He left before she arrived.

TGG

But what was her position in the house?

MAGDALENA

She was consort to Gervaise Gervaise Gervaise, the stripling lad's grandfather.

TGG

You prove exceptionally inventive, Countess, but tell me this.

MAGDALENA

I am at your service.

TGG

This will establish or destroy your veracity once and for all.

MAGDALENA

Ask what you will.

TGG

What was the name of that Parisian establishment?

MAGDALENA

*De toute évidence.* The Asparagus Garden.

TGG

Oh my God.

MAGDALENA

And I was that consort to the elder Gervaise.

TGG

*(embraces HER impetuously)*  
Grandmother!  
*(the look of horror on HER face at the word 'grandmother' is terrible to see)*

MAGDALENA

Grandmother? Sir! I forbid you!

TGG

Or at any rate common-law step-grandmother.

MAGDALENA

Common! I shall not remain here to be insulted.

*(MAGDALENA sweeps toward the door)*

TGG

Annie!

ANNIE

Yes!

TGG

There's your ultimate weapon.

*(MAGDALENA pauses in the doorway)*

If she ever again threatens anyone with her binoculars, simply address her by her rightful title, Grandmother.

MAGDALENA

Oh!

ANNIE

Genius!

MAGDALENA

*(to TGG)*

Sir, you have no breeding.

TGG

*(a hand on HARRY's shoulder)*

*Au contraire, Countess. I am overbred.*

HARRY

I do my humble best.

MAGDALENA

Peasants!

*(MAGDALENA exits)*

VIVIAN

I don't understand. *(drinks. She's pretty far gone)*

ANNIE

No.

Chaz, top me off? VIVIAN

Love to. CHAZ

I owe you and Harry brunch next Sunday. What time? ANNIE

(*checking with TGG*)  
Noon? HARRY

Sounds good. TGG

And I owe you so much more. ANNIE

Oh, my dear. What are neighbors for? TGG

*End of Play*  
CURTAIN