

A Good Neighborhood

A novel
by Therese Anne Fowler

PART I

1.

An upscale new house in a simple old neighborhood. A girl on a chaise beside a swimming pool, who wants to be left alone. We begin our story here, in the minutes before the small event that will change everything. A Sunday afternoon in May when our neighborhood is still maintaining its tenuous peace, a loose balance between *old* and *new*, *us* and *them*. Later this summer when the funeral takes place, the media will speculate boldly on who's to blame. They'll challenge attendees to say on camera whose side they're on.

For the record: we never *wanted* to take sides.

Juniper Whitman, the poolside girl, was seventeen. A difficult age, no question, even if you have everything going for you—which it seemed to us she did. It's trite to say “appearances can be deceiving,” so we won't say that. We'll say no one can be known by only what's visible. We'll say, most of us hide what troubles and confuses us, displaying instead the facets we hope others will approve of, the parts we hope others will like. Juniper was hiding something, and she didn't know whether to be ashamed or angry or just exactly what.

This new home's yard was much smaller than Juniper's old one—not even a third of an acre, when before she'd had three. Where was she supposed to go when she needed to get away but wasn't allowed to leave? There was hardly any space here that was not taken up by the house and the pool, and what space there was had no cover. There was no privacy at all. At her previous address, Juniper had liked to sit among the tall longleaf pines at the back of the property, far enough from the house that she felt like she could breathe and think. She liked to be amid the *biota*, as the scientists call it. It made her feel better. Always had.

But the builder of this big, gleaming white house had cleared the lot of the stately hardwoods that shaded the little house that had been here, the house that had been demolished without ceremony and removed like so much storm or earthquake debris. Except there had been no storm, no earthquake. There was just this desirable neighborhood in the middle of a desirable North Carolina city, and buyers with ready money to spend. Just that, and now this great big house with its small but expensive naked yard and its pool and its chaise and its girl and her book.

Juniper thought the rustling noises she heard in the yard behind hers, a yard that still contained a small forest of dogwood, hickory, pecan, chestnut, pine, and a tremendous oak that had been there for longer than anyone in the neighborhood had been alive, came from squirrels. She wasn't fond of squirrels. They were cute, sure, but you couldn't trust them not to run straight under the wheels of your car when they saw you coming. And they were forever getting into people's bird feeders and stealing all the seed. Juniper had a novel in her lap and steered her attention back to that. The story was good, and she'd become skillful at escaping into stories.

“Hey,” said a voice that was not a squirrel’s. Juniper looked up, saw a teenaged boy standing at the edge of her backyard with a rake in one hand, the other hand raised in greeting. He said, “You must be our new neighbor. I’m about to clear out some leaves and saw you there, so, you know, I figured I’d say hey.”

His appearance was a surprise in two ways. Juniper hadn’t known anyone was nearby, so there was that. But even if she had suspected there was a person, a boy, a teen like herself, she would have expected him to look like her—that is, white. Everyone in her old neighborhood was white. Instead, he was black, she was pretty sure. Light-skinned, with corkscrew hair the darkest possible shade of gold.

“Hey,” she said. “Yeah. We moved in yesterday—my little sister and my parents and me.”

“You all from out of town?”

“No, just farther out in this town.”

He smiled. “Cool. Well, I didn’t mean to bother you. Just, you know, welcome.”

“No bother. Thanks.”

If this had been the extent of it, if they’d been able to greet each other and then leave it at that—well, everything would have been a lot simpler for everyone. To say the least.

2.

North Carolina has a temperate climate. That's a big part of its draw. Winter is mild. Spring arrives early. Yes, summers are hot, but fall brings relief and lasts a long time. The oaks keep their leaves well into December and sometimes, when winter is especially gentle, some of the varieties—the live oak being one, with its slim, feather-shaped delicate-seeming leaves—stay leafed throughout winter as well.

The boy who greeted Juniper that first day, Xavier Alston-Holt, knew a lot about trees. They weren't a special interest of his; he was far more interested in music, and in particular, music made using acoustic guitars. Guitars, though, are made from wood, so when his mother talked to him in endless detail about various trees, their habitats, their residents, their qualities, their vulnerabilities (greedy homebuilders topping that list), he mostly paid attention. When his mother stood in their backyard taking video and crying the day the lot behind theirs was cleared, the day men with chainsaws and grinders started at dawn and continued until dusk and his ears rang for the rest of the night, he stayed there in the yard with his arm around her shoulders because that was what he could do for her. She'd done so much for him.

And so Xavier was not surprised, nor were any of us, that his mother was not eager to meet the new neighbors who'd bought the freshly built house behind theirs. Valerie Alston-Holt was not sure how to be friendly with the kind of people who would

put up the money to tear down the old house and cut down the trees. *All* of the trees. “People like that,” she’d said more than once—for this kind of thing was happening throughout Oak Knoll now in varying degrees—“people like that have no conscience. It’s like they’re raping the landscape. Murdering it. Trees are life. Not just *my* life,” she would add, since her fields were forestry and ecology, “but life, period. They literally make oxygen. We need to keep at least seven trees for every human on the planet, or else people are going to start suffocating. Think of that.”

Xavier walked around to the wooded front yard where his mother was clipping peonies for display on a sick neighbor’s bedside table. The plant beds around their modest brick ranch, a house that had been built in 1952 and was not much updated since, were Valerie’s favorite things, second only to her son and one tree, the massive old eighty-foot oak that dominated their back yard. You might not think a tree could mean so much to a person. This tree, though, was more than a magnificent piece of arboreal history; for Valerie Alston-Holt it was a witness and companion. Its wide trunk was the first thing she noticed each time she looked out the windows into the back yard. It recalled to her many moments from the years they’d lived here, not the least of which was the summer night she had stood and pressed her forehead against its nubby gray-brown bark and cried while Xavier slept in his crib, the boy too young to know that God had just robbed them blind.

Six varieties of irises. Peonies in four different colors. Azaleas, phlox, snowdrops, camellias, rhododendrons, clematis, honeysuckle, jasmine—you name it, Valerie Holt had installed it somewhere on their plot. Tending her plants was her therapy, she liked to say, her way of shutting out the stresses that came with teaching undergraduates at the

university—or, more often, the stresses that came from dealing with the department head or the dean. The kids were actually pretty great. Curious. Smart. Political in ways she approved of—useful ways, ways that helped protect natural habitats, or tried to, anyway, and that was worth a lot. Young people were going to save the world from itself, and she was going to encourage them in every way she could.

Now Xavier said to her, “The time has come.”

“What time is that? Are you going somewhere?” She laid the flowers and clippers in her basket and then stood upright. “I thought you were going to clear out those dead leaves for me.”

“I am. We have new neighbors.”

“Oh, that. I know. It was inevitable. Like death,” Valerie added with a rueful smile.

Xavier said, “I met one of them just now. She says it’s her and one sister and their parents.”

“Only four people in that huge house?”

Xavier shrugged. “Guess so.”

“How old?”

“The girl? My age, I think, give or take. And a ‘little sister’ she said. I didn’t ask about her.”

His mother nodded. “Okay. Thanks for the intel.”

“Do you want me to find you if the parents come outside?”

“No. Yes. Of course. I am going to be a good neighbor.”

“You always are.”

“Thanks, Zay.”

“Just telling it like it is.”

“That’s what we have to do, as much as we can.”

Xavier returned to the backyard and got to work raking out the leaves from an area where his mother intended to put a koi pond. With him going off to the San Francisco Conservatory of Music for school in the fall, she’d said she needed new beings to keep her occupied so that she didn’t call him every day to make sure he could survive on the opposite side of the country without her. He knew she was joking; she wouldn’t call daily regardless. She’d want to, but she wouldn’t. He understood. They’d been a pretty exclusive duo for a long time.

He’d said, “Make the pond, and maybe date someone *local*.”

“Oh, look who’s talking about dating.”

He gave her that crooked smile of his that had made him so popular with all the older ladies here in Oak Knoll, as well as, we were sure, the girls at his school. He said, “I’m too busy to have a girlfriend.”

“Too picky, it seems to me.”

“I know you are but what am I?” he said.

The fact is, Xavier was both picky and busy—but mostly picky. He hadn’t met anyone who made him feel like he ought to change any of his priorities. He had plenty of female friends and, among them, girls who would have dated him if he’d pursued their interest. He hadn’t pursued it, though, because he knew himself well enough to understand he was an all or nothing kind of guy. Always had been. He’d hooked up with

a couple of girls in the past year mainly due to lust and opportunity, but a relationship was not workable for him right now. His music was his love.

Now he glanced at the poolside girl, the new neighbor, the girl he'd sort of met. *What's her name?* he thought. *Why do you care?* he also thought. *Just do your work.*

Xavier had been six years old when he first strummed a guitar, at a birthday party for the daughter of one of his mom's colleagues. Several of the adults had brought instruments—guitars, mandolins, bongos, harmonica—and after the cake and presents, everyone gathered on the uneven brick patio in plastic lawn chairs to play and sing. First it was Raffi songs, for the kids, then a lot of Neil Young and the Beatles and some James Taylor. Xavier thought the music was fine, but it was one particular guitar that snagged his curiosity. He liked the look of it, and its clear, bright tone. He'd asked its owner, a history professor named Sean, if he could try it. Sean sat him down and put the guitar on Xavier's lap. The instrument was huge in comparison to the boy's skinny little self. Xavier held the neck and reached over the top and strummed, and that was it, he was gone. A week later he took his first lesson. By ten, he was fixed on classical music exclusively; of all the genres, classical was the one that made him *feel* beauty, and he needed that feeling to help him get through all the emotional noise in his world. Then earlier this year, now eighteen years old, he'd auditioned for a coveted spot at SFCM and got it.

Xavier raked the leaves into a pile and began stuffing them into the biodegradable bags Valerie bought from a shop where every item cost four times as much as its cheaper but usually toxic (in one way or another) alternative. Most of their cleaning, bathing, storage, and clothing products came from there. Between this and the gardening and

Xavier's music lessons, it was little wonder there wasn't much money for updating the house, had Valerie been inclined to bother. We made fun of her sometimes—the way we did with our friend who'd gone so far with the Paleo Diet that he wouldn't even eat food made with grains unless that grain had been milled by hand with a stone. Valerie took our ribbing in the spirit with which it was given: affection, since we couldn't help but love a woman as caring as she was, and respect the way she stuck to her guns.

The new neighbor was still on the chaise by the glittering blue dug-in pool, still reading. He liked the sight (of the girl, mainly, though the pool looked really nice). Though he hadn't yet had a chance to study her features, his initial impression was favorable. White girl. Really long brown hair. Pretty face. Plaid shirt tied at the waist, sleeves rolled up. Cut-off denim shorts. No shoes. Dark toenail polish—green, maybe? He kept an eye on her as he worked, and had the odd but pleasing sense that she stayed deliberately aware of him as she read.

“Sunscreen, Juniper,” a woman's voice said. Xavier looked up from his work to see a woman coming outside through tall French doors to the covered porch, a bottle of sunscreen in hand.

Juniper.

The woman's hair was blond and long, but not as long as Juniper's. She wore it in a high ponytail above gold hoop earrings, which did not, in Xavier's opinion, go with the tight fitness tank top and shorts and tennis shoes, all of it in trendy patterns and colors that, if he had known about fitness fashion, he'd have recognized came from Ultracor's spring collection. She looked like a catalog ad.

Watching the woman, Xavier thought *well-kept*, the term he'd heard some of the women use when his mother had her friends over for book club. While they always did eventually get around to discussing the book, whatever it might be, first they had the "graze and gossip" part of the evening. Lately that term, *well-kept*, was in the gossip part of the evening a lot, in correspondence with the increasing number of high-end houses being built nearby. The women tried to make it simply an observation but Xavier could tell that it was a judgment, too. These women were all professionals—some were teachers or professors, like his mother, some were in public health or social work or ran a small business. None of them were kept.

Xavier liked to hang out with them, not to gossip (their business was their business) but to avail himself of the appetizers and salads they brought. They brought wine, too. Plenty of wine. He was eighteen, now, old enough to die for his country and therefore old enough to have a glass of wine with his hummus and olives, his chevre-stuffed figs, his lentil-arugula salad, etcetera, that's what they all liked to say. Xavier wasn't much for wine but he would never say no to the so-called "crack dip," a hot cream-cheese-Rotel-spicy-crumbled-sausage *extravaganza*, as far as he was concerned. He planned to buy a crock-pot for his dorm room so that he could make it himself and basically live on the stuff.

"*Juniper*," the well-kept woman said again, this time with annoyance.

"Juniper," Xavier said to himself, softly, trying it out. Then he thought, *Idiot. You got no time for this.*

"Seriously, Mom?" said Juniper.

“On your face? Absolutely. Arms and legs, too. You have to take care of your skin now, or you’ll end up spending way too much money treating sun damage later. Do you want to end up looking like Grandma Lottie? I wish *I’d* had a mom as smart as I am.”

“If you do say so yourself,” said Juniper, taking the sunscreen.

“By the way, do *not* tell Grandma I said that.”

Next came a shirtless man with a golf tan, wearing coral colored flowered shorts below the protruding belly common to so many middle-aged men. He left the tall door open behind him. “Is this the life or what?” he said. He carried a bottle of beer in one hand and a pitcher of something pink in the other. Setting the pitcher on a teak dining table, he added, “Who’s ready for a swim?”

“I am!” said a little girl, skipping outside behind him.

The woman said, “Are you sure the water’s warm enough? They just filled it yesterday.”

The little girl, maybe seven years old, fuchsia bikini, big yellow sunglasses, put her hands on her hips and answered, “Mommy, are you a man or a mouse?”

Xavier, realizing that he was staring, finished stuffing a bag and then put down his rake and turned to go find his mother. Might as well get the introductions over with.

Before he got more than a few steps, though, the man called to him.

“Hey there, son.”

Xavier turned around. The man was waving and walking toward him.

“Listen,” he said, coming into the yard, “I’m wondering if I might hire you to do some work for *me* when you’re done here. We just moved in and I’ve got boxes to haul out and break down, some furniture to move around—my wife, she couldn’t make up her

mind with the movers, so..." He chuckled. "Fifty bucks sound fair? I don't need you for but an hour or so—pretty good pay, right?"

"Oh. I... That is, I'm just helping out my mom." Xavier pointed toward the house. "I'm Xavier Alston-Holt. Most people call me Zay," he said, extending his hand.

"Ah," the man said, and shook Xavier's hand. "Brad Whitman, Whitman HVAC. You've probably seen my commercials, right?"

"Maybe?" Xavier said. "We don't have TV."

"I'm on the internet, and radio, too."

"Okay, sure."

Brad leaned in and tapped Xavier's shoulder with his fist, saying, "Heh, I thought you were *hired* by the old lady who lives here."

Xavier smiled politely. "I don't think my mom would appreciate being called 'the old lady.'"

"No, right? What woman would?"

"She's only forty-eight."

"That so? Guess my realtor got it wrong," Brad Whitman said. "But there *are* lots of old ladies in the neighborhood, isn't that a fact?"

Xavier nodded. "And some old men. Everything, really."

"Sure," Brad said. "That's what we want, right?"

Xavier nodded. "So, I was just about to get my mom. She wants to say hello."

"Sure, good. Bring her over." Brad pointed toward his house. "Julia just made some pink lemonade. The girls love it. I'll offer you a beer if you've got ID saying you're twenty-one."

“Not yet, but thanks. Be right back.”

Xavier was almost to the house when Brad Whitman called, “Bring your dad, too, if he’s home. I’ve got a cold one for him, at least.”

Xavier raised his hand to acknowledge he’d heard.

Bring his father? He wished he could. He had always wished he could.