

# The Neighbors

By Bill Fitzhugh

Monday  
September 10, 2001

“Barry... ” Vic’s voice came over the line in a strangled, halting, whisper. “I’m . . . castrated.”

“What?” Barry nearly dropped the phone so he could wipe his hands.

“They’re... cut... off.” Vic sounded as if he were struggling for breath and life itself.

“What? Why?”

“Bleeding’s... bad.”

“Why are you calling me? Dial 9-1-1!”

Vic wanted to go on, but he couldn’t. That was all he could take. It hurt too much to continue. He had to laugh. “Jesus,” he said. “I’m kidding. You think I’d call you if I was sitting here bleeding profusely from my crotch? What the fuck good would that do?”

Barry, sitting in his Santa Monica office, smiled as he raked a hand through his thready hair and said, “Vic, you had me goin’ there. You oughta be an actor.”

“Who’s acting?”

A slight pause before, “Whaddya mean?”

“You don’t listen to a word I say, do you? And just so you know, that’s a bad thing for an agent. I told you I was getting this done months ago.”

“Getting castrated.”

“My vasectomy.”

“Oh that’s right,” Barry said. “The trial of the century.”

After nearly being trapped in a paternity suit by a woman who had studied at the Bonnie Lee Bakley School of Shakedown, Vic had undergone the operation. Given his tenuous grip on the bottom rung of the middle class ladder, Vic could scarcely afford another lawsuit, let alone a wife or a kid. When served with the papers, however, Vic and his agent had briefly entertained the notion that they might be able to turn the proceedings into a boost for Vic’s sagging career, but the press didn’t bite. Vic’s star as a screenwriter had never risen to the heights necessary to have this qualify for the schadenfreude derby that was Hollywood.

“The only way to make something out of this would be to kill her,” Barry had said.

“And get caught.”

“Sure, focus on the down side.”

Barry had a soft spot for Vic, even if he wasn’t much of an earner. Vic’s odd sense of humor was as refreshing as his genuine gratitude for the work Barry did on his behalf. And the fact that Vic didn’t seem to have anyone else – no family or friends – always triggered something in Barry. It wasn’t compassion exactly, more like pity. So he said, “How’d it go? You feeling all right?”

“Fine,” Vic said. “Yeah, I got back about an hour ago. Sitting here with a big martini and a bag of cracked ice on my sack. Or a sack of ice on my cracked bag, take your pick.”

“That’s lovely, thanks.”

Vic giggled as the vodka and narcotics seeped into his blood. “Consider it your ten percent,” he said. “And they gave me some award-winning narcotics too. Best of show. These little yellow fuckers, whatever they are, are fantastic!”

“I’m happy for you,” Barry said. “Is this going to delay your second draft?”

“What do you think? You think you’d get anything done in this condition?”

“Fine, I’ll tell them you had, uh, emergency surgery. You need some more time.”

“You out of your mind?” Vic spilled some vodka as he eased himself into his lounge chair. “Those fuckers get so much as a whiff of sickness they’ll drop me from the project faster than you can say ‘numb nuts.’”

“You know they’re not like that,” Barry assured him. “They’re people. People with testicles, I might add. They’ll understand.” He had a thought. “Or I could say it was like a chin tuck, something like that.”

“Do me a favor,” Vic said, the insinuation clear.

“Fine, I’ll lie.”

“Atta boy.”



Vic had given himself the week off to recuperate. He planned to spend some quality time watching daytime TV and getting drunk. And not just tipsy either. He was aiming for peanut-brained and legless, squiffy-eyed, starched, monkey-sucking drunk. What you might call a serious bender. Something to mark the end of a rough patch and the start of something new. The paternity suit had tapped another nail into Vic’s financial coffin. He was hoping the new script would be his revival. And he wanted to come at it fresh, like starting a new year. But as it was September, he had to create an artificial starting point. He figured the back end of a drinking binge would do fine.

So he kicked back and took another sip, a good one, and allowed himself the luxury of thinking back on his moment of glory. After a decade of struggle, Vic had broken through when one of his scripts sold for good money, got made, and did well at the box office. After that, the offers poured in. He cherry-picked the good ones. He bought a little house out in Canoga Park and figured the money would keep coming as long as he wrote. It was a common mistake.

His tax returns said Vic was a writer but he preferred the older term: scenarist. He came up with scenes. Circumstances with dramatic possibilities. Scenarios. He’d tried actual writing once but boy, what a pain in the ass that was. And no money in it either. Hell, Vic didn’t want to be Faulkner, Fitzgerald, or Mailer - which was fortunate since such desires would lead only to crushing disappointment for someone with his skills. And he had skills. They simply wouldn’t be described as of the literary variety.

Vic wrote for the citizens of the cineplex. The popcorn crowd sucked his stuff up like so many crack whores. Nasty, violent stuff. Stories with secretly planted bombs. Paranoid fantasies come to life. Children trapped in dark, moist places, being chopped, drilled, and sawed into gruesome bits. A regrettable pastiche of pornographic savagery. Blood, flesh, nerves, and teeth. Awful compositions of explosions, exploitation, and

horror punctuated by counterfeit moments of shock created by sudden, loud noises rather than anything remotely resembling genuine tension.

At least that's how Vic described his work. Hell, he knew what it was. It was software for a machine that needed more every week. It was escapism, cheap thrills, and a way to make a living without a commute. It was commerce, by God, nothing more, nothing less. As the old saying goes, they don't call it show *art*, they call it show *business*.

And business was good. Life was good. At least for a while. But then he turned down some offers and demanded too much money and started talking about gross points, and before he knew what had happened, the offers started going elsewhere. Somebody else got hot. People forgot Vic's name.

Well fuck 'em, Vic thought. The business was all about cycles. He'd been up, he'd been down. Only one place to go from there. He figured the new script would put him back in the game. He was looking forward to getting back to it, almost as much as he was looking forward to his bender.

After the surgery, Vic bought four bottles of vodka. And not just any vodka. Something new for the new economy. Forty bucks a pop. Made from rare seedless albino grapes or the dew of Danish virgins or something equally esoteric. Vic put the bottles in his freezer along with half a dozen martini glasses. After his first one, Vic had to admit, it was the best drink he'd ever had.

And the pills. Hoo-boy, the pills were great.

So he sat in the leather recliner all afternoon slurping vodka like a Massachusetts senator with his dick in a sling. He stayed there into the night, getting pickled in the comforting blue light of his big-screen television.

The last thing he saw was a late night sports recap with the biggest news story of the day: Michael Jordan hinting at another comeback. After that Vic drifted off, or passed out, one.



**Tuesday  
September 11, 2001**

Vic woke up in the chair, dehydrated as a piece of dried fruit, a thrumming hangover like rodent teeth gnawing on his optic nerves. He rubbed the crusty sleep from the corners and brought his eyes into focus so he could check his scrotal support. He was shocked at first, primarily because he'd forgotten that he'd shaved himself for yesterday's operation. It looked like a featherless, newly hatched bird-of-prey or maybe a small boneless chicken. He couldn't decide. His fevered imagination had allowed that he might wake up with a pair of grotesquely bruised eggs, yellow-brown as they approached gangrene. Strangled, with a sweet smelling discharge, ready to pop like overripe figs.

But no. Everything seemed all right down there. No discoloration, no swelling, no nothing.

But the pain. The pain was in need of management.

But first things first. He shuffled wobbly down the hall, cupping himself as he moved toward the can. A deep breath. He stood in front of the toilet, over-abundant in

his caution, treating his cock as if it were a contact-explosive. Carefully now. No wiggling. Gently. Ahhh.

Then to the kitchen, bowlegged as a cowboy. He gave the coffee machine a passing glance but decided the answer lay in the hair of the dog. Specifically a greyhound. He juiced a grapefruit, fresh from his own backyard, then pulled a chilled glass from the freezer, glugged it full with the special edition vodka and splashed it with the grapefruit juice, pink as a lip. Ahhh. The California lifestyle.

He wobbled back to his lounge chair, leaving small puddles in his wake. He took one of the yellow pills for breakfast and chased it with the greyhound, oblivious that the world had changed while he slept.

And slept.

Even considering the previous night's consumption, Vic was surprised how late it was. His eyes rotated slowly to the ceiling, then out the window. Something was odd. Then it occurred to him. It was so quiet. Unusually, weirdly, quiet. That's why he'd been able to sleep. But why the hush? The skies above Los Angeles were usually brawling with police, news, and traffic helicopters, private planes coming and going from Van Nuys, big jets leaving LAX or approaching Burbank.

But right now, nothing. It was eerie.

Still, it was nice. Vic took another sip on his breakfast bracer and felt the yellow pill dissolving in his system. Calming the synapses. Relaxing the muscles. Slowing his breath.

Then he turned on the television.

At first he thought nothing of it, assumed he'd tuned into a movie-of-the-week disaster story. All shaky hand-held video footage of panic and destruction. Billowing clouds of mucking grey dust stampeding office workers through a canyon of a street like shotgun pellets down a barrel. The script sounded improvised but had a genuine urgency. Vic changed the channel a few times only to find the same story everywhere he went. Even the words *Breaking News* splashed across the screen, Vic assumed, was part of it. But part of what? Intellectually he knew they wouldn't be showing the same movie at the same time on every channel. But the alternative refused to register. The alternative didn't make any sense. Slowly though, the truth began to find its way past the impossibility of itself.

And then he accepted it, or tried to. This was real. This was happening. Or, as the facts began to organize in his mind, he understood that it had already happened. Back east, New York, D.C., somewhere in Pennsylvania. Hours ago. All flights grounded. That explained the quiet.

He drank heavily as he made a few calls of the can-you-fucking-believe-it variety. But mostly he just sat there, growing sick from the news, yet unable to turn away. He'd never felt anything like it. It was shock, disbelief, not knowing who, what, why. Why? He spent the day going from channel to channel as if hoping that someone eventually would say something to explain it all.

But he never found that channel.

No one knew anything for sure, so they just kept talking. A blur of chattering heads. Wolf Blitzer with Madeline Albright. A cowardly attack, yes. And it was tempting to speculate on state sponsorship, but let's not. Aaron Brown with one senator calling it an international crime. Woodruff with another senator saying it was an act of

war. Jeff Greenfield guessing 22,000 dead, on the order of the Battle at Antietam. Worst in American history. All that death once again in the name of God. Allah. Call it what you will. Three or four hundred firefighters running toward the thing everyone else was running away from. Pearl Harbor for a new generation. Our hearts go out. Rumors of heavy volume on put options for airline and insurance stocks. Did someone profit on this? Premature to point fingers. It's still unfolding. We don't know. But early finger-pointing is this guy bin Laden.

And the awful footage over and over and over, dripping on his mind like Chinese water torture. Relentless and more sickening with each replay. The planes striking the buildings. The unfathomable, consuming fireballs. Small white flags waving from smoking windows.

It was odd. Vic felt sickeningly, viscerally connected to the events while at the same time feeling completely disconnected from them. As if it had happened to him but without his being involved. Maybe it was too much to absorb from 3,000 miles away. Maybe if he were there, Vic thought, if he could look out his window and see it, smell it, taste it in the air, maybe then it would make more sense or seem more real. If he could be there to do something, maybe it would be different. But he couldn't be there. All he could do was watch the images hour after hour after hour. What else was he going to do? He had to watch. All the death, the loss, the grief. The magnitude.

He drank two more greyhounds. After that he stopped bothering with the grapefruit juice altogether. He just stared at the screen, sucking the vodka down wholesale, pummeled by each new fragment the networks hurled his way. FAA radar data for United Flight 93. A call from a cell. Passengers voting to take the plane back. "Let's roll." The heroes augering into a field minutes later.



**Wednesday  
September 12, 2001**

The television was still on when Vic woke up. Material witnesses had been arrested. Raids on apartments in New Jersey and Del Ray Beach, Florida. FBI agents seen wearing protective suits as they carried boxes from the apartments.

The word hangover was no longer adequate to its task. Vic's brain had shrunk from the walls of his skull, the nerve endings swollen and throbbing, his mouth dry and gummy as a two year old glue stick.

He started drinking immediately. He checked the prescription and saw he had refills. He found a pharmacy that delivered. Then he returned to the television news and the relentless assault on his emotions. He knew there was nothing he could do. Knowing more couldn't help, wouldn't do anyone any good, but Vic wanted every scrap they came up with. The attacks and the coverage had churned up a ravenous hatred that needed to be fed.

The hijackers had seventy-eight virgins waiting for them. Nobody else did. Flight training in Florida. No red flags. No instruction on landing or take off. No red flags. Names on terrorist watch lists. No red flags. Security camera capturing Mohamad Atta breezing through security at Portland Airport. No red flags. Al Qaeda sleeper cells in forty US states according to the FBI. No red flags.

Fifty billion didn't buy as much security as one might hope.

The stunned sensation that had held Vic in its grip began turning to rage. It was a delayed reaction, like being somewhere, minding your own business, when out of the blue someone sucker punches you. It takes a minute to put things together, to figure out the who, why, and the what-the-fuck. You're stunned for that moment. But then you're furious and can't be stopped. Someone has to pay for it. That's how Vic felt now. Something had to be done. Somebody had to die. Lots of people had to die. What were we waiting on? "Let's roll!"

The feeling of helplessness – was that the right word? – his inability to be in New York to do something, to move rubble, to give blood, to do anything simply increased his rage. Was it helplessness or impotence? He thought of his operation. He looked at his boneless chicken, drank some more, and took one of the yellow pills.

Flight attendants, passengers, pilots. Throats and box cutters. Jihad! Desperate, wrenching phone calls from 30,000 feet. People jumping from 90 floors up. Someone in a wheelchair trapped in a stairwell. Jihad! The footage again and again of the terrorist training camp that looked so ridiculous. Men with their faces covered by the head scarf carrying Kalashnikovs as they jumped over a comically low barrier and crawled through a corrugated culvert pipe like some grammar school obstacle course. Jihad! *This* was the enemy? We can't stop *these* guys? The government couldn't find, or at least fake, better footage of a terrorist training camp?

A feeling of doom settled into his gut.



A car's horn startled Vic from his drunken stupor. It started the neighbor's dogs barking. It was late now, eleven-fifteen. The news was still infecting the nation.

The horn sounded a second time.

It's that guy across the street again, Vic thought. What sort of asshole has..?

And all the sudden, it hit him like a truck full of explosives. Fuck! Vic sat bolt upright. His eyes and his mind narrowing all at once.

That guy across the street. That dark skinned, secretive son of a bitch with the odd habits.

Vic had never thought about it before. He'd never had *reason* to. But now. Now he had a goddamn reason.

*The FBI estimates there are sleeper cells operating in forty states.*

Son of a bitch.

The horn sounded again and Vic went to the window to look. Same as before. A car had stopped at the end of the man's driveway and honked. The man came from his house out to the street. Vic snuck outside for a closer look, creeping along his hedges, out of sight. There were no streetlights. It was too dark to see details. The driver got out and met the man from the house. The trunk popped open. A transaction of some sort. They spoke but Vic couldn't catch the words, wasn't sure of the language. The man returned to the house. The car drove off in the night.

And that got Vic to thinking.



He hurried inside, fueled by adrenaline, vodka, and a new sense of fear-driven duty. He grabbed a legal pad and sat in front of the tube marshaling his evidence from memory, all the things he'd seen from his window that didn't add up now that he thought about it, now that he had some context, now that someone had told him what was going on and what to be on the look out for. The suspicious deliveries, unusual driving habits, scraps from personal letters cross-cut by a paper shredder on the street after spilling from the recycling, the list grew long. As he wrote, Vic continued subjecting himself to the televised barrage of the hideous, the appalling, and the grim.

Jihad! The messages left on the answering machines of loved ones, play on the air. Doomed voices Vic would never get out of his head. Stories about the rain of body parts from the towers. Jihad! Grim administration insiders with we-told-you-so's and talk of preemptive strikes. Get them before they get us. Let's roll!

Hell yes, Vic thought. That's exactly what we have to do from now on. Jihad!



**Friday  
September 14, 2001**

"Can you fucking believe it? They've got these sleeper cells in forty states," Vic said. "They're here. They live all over the damn country."

"Yeah, I read a story about it in *The Times*," Barry said. "Pretty scary stuff."

"Scary as all hell," Vic said.

"And this has happened before? The car late at night, the weird business in the dark?"

"Hell yes," Vic said. "A bunch of times. At *least* a dozen, probably more. I wasn't counting. And they've only lived there about nine months."

"Maybe the driver just doesn't like to back up," Barry said.

"What?"

"Maybe it's just easier to stop at the end of the driveway, rather than pulling in and backing out."

"It's a circular fucking driveway!" Vic said. "That's my point! Actually it's shaped more like a lower-case h, you know, with a spur leading to the garage in the back. The house is set back thirty or forty feet and there's a big circular drive, so why not just pull up to the front door, do whatever the deal is, and drive straight out? Saves the guy in the house from walking all the way to the street and the driver never has to back up or anything. None of it makes any sense."

"What I don't understand is, if it was some sort of terrorist thing, why would they do it right there on the street? Why not be more secretive?"

"But it *is* secretive," Vic said. "It's pitch black out there at night. They never do it during the day when anyone could see them. You know me. I'm here all the time working. I can't help but see everything that goes on around here. I know every dog that's walked, every FedEx, UPS, DHL, and Sparkletts delivery that happens on this street. But this car only comes late at night. They probably figure no one's watching, figure they're being as secretive as they need to be."

"And you're sure it's not pizza or Chinese?"

"Yes, I'm sure," Vic said. "Jesus."

“Are the streetlights burned out there or what?”

“No, this stretch never had any, which is great. Kids don’t even come down here on Halloween. Keeps things quiet.”

“Well,” Barry said. “I admit, it’s a little weird.”

“A little? Listen, I can see half a dozen of my neighbors houses from here. You know how many of them I’ve seen do anything remotely like this? None. Zero.”

“Maybe it’s a drug deal,” Barry said.

“Maybe,” Vic said. “According to a thing I saw last night, that’s one of the ways they fund their activities. But I was thinking it might be money laundering. Have you heard about the hawala thing?”

“The what?”

“It’s a way they transfer money without involving banking systems. No records, nothing. They’ve been using it for centuries in the Middle East. Maybe this guy’s one of the paymasters for the sleeper cells.”

“You’ve been doing your homework,” Barry said, sensing a project. “You think there’s a story here? Something for a spec script?”

“Listen,” Vic said. “I’ve got a whole list of their weird behavior that I never really thought about, until now. Now some of it makes sense. Like when the guy walks out to his driveway for these long, agitated phone calls? I have no idea what language. I tried to listen but that’s twenty yards even if I’m right behind the bushes. I was thinking about going to this spy shop and getting one of those parabolic mikes, but, not that I understand Urdu, but. . .”

“He speaks Urdu?”

“Urdu, Farsi, I don’t know what he speaks,” Vic said.. “But I’ve never *heard* him speak English.”

“Have you ever talked to him?”

Vic peeked out the window and said, “No, he doesn’t make himself available like that. I’ve never seen him talk to any neighbors either, now that I think about it. But my point was about the way he wanders around while he’s out in his driveway. I swear this guy’s on a satellite phone and he’s trying to get a better signal.”

“Like he’s calling his boss back in Afghanistan,” Barry said, wheels turning. “At a terrorist training camp. The reveal is that the call is coming from a sleeper cell in suburban America. Something like that, that’s good. Of course it’ll be a while before we can pitch anything. Everybody’s a little sensitive right now, but that’ll pass. This guy lives alone?”

“No,” Vic said. “There’s a woman, his wife. I mean I’ve always assumed she’s his wife. They both look Middle Eastern of some sort. Shit, I couldn’t tell a Sunni from a Kurd. I mean, face it, we wouldn’t be having this conversation if they looked like Swedes. But check this out, the woman does this all the time. She’ll get in her car, drive to the end of the driveway, and stay there while she puts on her makeup.”

“Maybe she’s just trying to save time.”

“No!” Vic said, as if admonishing a dog. “That doesn’t make any sense. Think about it. If you want to save time by putting makeup on in the car, you do it while you’re driving or while you’re stopped at lights on your way to wherever you’re going. Not while sitting still in your driveway. You might as well stay inside and do it.”

“I see your point,” Barry said.

“The more I hear about the Taliban, the more I think it’s got something to do with the fact that their women are supposed to keep themselves covered and are absolutely forbidden to wear makeup. *But* if they’re a sleeper cell, this woman can’t very well be running around in one of those burkas, can she? So maybe the man is trying to keep things as close to Islamic law as he can. Have you seen the stories on Sharia? Jesus, these people are nuts, makes fundamentalist Christians look like Girls Gone Wild. Anyway, maybe he refuses to let her put makeup on in the house. Makes her wait until she’s out of his sight or something, I don’t know. Regardless, the behavior is weird.”

Barry said, “So you called the FBI?”

“Hell yes. Talked to Agent Ron Phillips.”

“What’d he say?”

“He was busy.”

“That’s it?”

“Well, he asked me to fax over my list of stuff, any information I had. So I did.”

“Okay,” Barry said. “I guess you did your part.”

“I don’t know,” Vic said. “He didn’t take me as seriously as I would have liked.”

“Well, what else can you do?” It was a rhetorical question. “Just think about the spec script idea, okay?”

“I’ll just wait and see if he gets back to me,” Vic said. “And meanwhile, I’m keeping an eye on the son of a bitch.”



**Sunday  
September 16, 2001**

By Sunday, Vic had seen the planes hit the towers over two hundred times. Replays in slow motion, at full speed, and freeze framed etched into his mind’s eye forever. He found himself crying once at the terrifying, intimate emotion of traumatized husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, wandering the streets of lower Manhattan holding photos of their loved ones. *Please. Have you seen her? Have you seen him? Can you help?*

Image rules the landscape, and the cumulative effect of the images repeated over twenty-four hour cycles was having its way with Vic. It fed the hatred and stoked the fires. And even if he turned it off, no matter how much he wanted them to stop, he couldn’t get the doomed voices out of his head.

Mostly, Vic wanted somebody to do something. He wanted missiles launched, bombs dropped, Special Forces infiltrating. He wanted populations decimated. He wanted the full wrath of the U.S. Military visited upon the heads of everyone responsible and anyone who had celebrated the moment. What were they waiting on? Why hadn’t there been any preemptive strikes?

Let’s fuckin’ roll!

Vic pushed his recliner across the room to the window where it was easier to keep an eye on the guy across the street. He dusted off his old binoculars and kept them on the side table next to his drink. When the vodka ran out he started on the scraps of his liquor cabinet beginning with half a bottle of Crown Royal and another yellow pill.

It was early afternoon when an unmarked panel van rolled slowly up the street. It was big enough to deliver any number of things. It pulled into the man's driveway. Vic had seen this before too. The driver, furtive and dark, glanced around before unloading something. The man from the house didn't sign for anything. The van left.

Vic got the plate number, picked up the phone, and called the FBI.

"I don't know if you call it a step van or a panel van or what," Vic said. "But it was sort of like a UPS truck, maybe a little smaller. It looked like it used to have a logo on the side but it's gone now. Oh, and it had Nevada plates," as if that cinched the deal.

"Anything else?" Agent Phillips asked sluggishly.

"No, that's it," Vic said. "Pretty suspicious, though."

"How so?"

Vic couldn't believe this guy. What did he want, the man on his prayer mat in the front yard five times a day? "Well," Vic said, "everybody else on the street gets deliveries from UPS, FedEx, and DHL. This guy has a second-hand, unmarked truck with out-of-state plates bringing stuff. And it's not the first time either. That's what's suspicious."

"All right," Agent Phillips said. "Thanks for the call. I'll put this with the rest of your stuff."



Barry didn't sound too surprised when he said, "That's it, huh?"

"Yeah, can you believe it? The fucker blew me off," Vic said. "I'm out here doing his goddamn job, handing 'em one on a platter and this is how they respond. That's why the terrorists could hijack those planes in the first place, you know? FBI, CIA, NSA, they all had the information they needed to stop it, they just didn't do anything with what they had."

"I don't know, Vic, maybe there's an innocent explanation for everything," Barry said.

"Yeah? I'd like to hear it," Vic said. "I'd sure as fuck like to. Hit me."

"I didn't say I *had* the explanation," Barry said, trying to sound calm, hoping it would be catching. He could tell Vic had been drinking. "I'm just saying, that's all." He paused before continuing, "Listen, have you thought about the spec script idea?"

Vic sensed that Barry wanted more evidence. He said, "Let me ask you. When you get home every day, I mean in your car. What do you do?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what do you do, park on the street? Pull in to your garage? Do you go in head first or do you back in? Do you alternate every other day? It's a simple question."

"I pull into the garage headfirst. Why?"

"Every day?"

"Yeah, every day."

"What about Cindy?"

"Same."

"Every time?"

"Yeah, every time. I mean, unless we've been to Costco or something, you know once every few months we might back in to unload stuff."

“Exactly,” Vic said. “Same as me. Same as everybody else I can see from my house. Same as everybody I’ve ever fucking known. Except for these people. Some days they park in front of the house, sometimes they pull head first into the garage, but a *lot* of the time they back into their garage like they’re loading or unloading something from the trunk. Explain that.”

“Maybe they go to Costco a lot. They have kids?”

“Yeah, that’s another thing,” Vic said. “About once every six weeks since they’ve been here, they’ll trot these two young boys out on the front lawn to pitch the baseball with ‘dad.’ I’ve never see them coming home from school or riding their bikes on the street, nothing. The other kids in the neighborhood? See ‘em all the time. But these people? It’s like they’re renting these kids to make it look like they’re an all-American family. To blend in. That’s what they said these sleeper cells do. They try to blend in.”

“That seems a little far-fetched.” There was something in Barry’s tone that said he wondered if the pins had come out of Vic’s hinges.

But Vic was past listening. “And the *parents*,” he said. “They come and go all day, like neither one of them has a job. But they’ve got to have a job or they couldn’t buy a house, right?”

“Maybe they’re independently wealthy.”

“And they live here? It doesn’t wash.”

“Maybe they’re writers.”

“Writers? They don’t sit still long enough to write anything.”

“I was joking,” Barry said. “I admit, it’s all pretty strange but don’t get too caught up in watching them. You’ve sent the information to the authorities, just let it go at that. But think about the spec script idea. You know, fade up: a Middle Eastern man on his satellite phone in an American suburb, talking to a terrorist in Syria, something like that.”

“I’ll tell you something else weird.” There was something spooky in his voice now. “I’ve never seen the two of them in a car together,” he said. “Ever. Period. Doesn’t that seem weird?”

“Vic, I’ve got to go. Warner Brothers on the line.”



Writing had taught Vic a few things about people. It was axiomatic in his line of work that the way one acted under pressure revealed a lot about one’s character. If a person talked a big game when things were copasetic but folded under stress, it was the folding part that told you who they really were. And, after that last shot of sweet whiskey, it was beginning to look to Vic as if Barry and Agent Phillips were both lacking in certain aspects of character now that the pressure was on.

It was good to know who you were dealing with, Vic thought. Then he heard someone on the news say you’re either with us or you’re against us. And everybody seemed to agree with that and so did Vic right at the moment.

But it left him feeling like he was on his own.

He’d been blown off by everyone from his literary agent to an FBI agent. Everyone treating him like he was overreacting. (And it wasn’t just Barry and Agent Phillips either. LAPD and the LA County Sheriff’s Department had both put him on hold

and left him there.) *Over-reacting?* Vic poured what was left from a bottle of Tia Maria, about two fingers worth. He looked at the dark liquid and said, "I bet everybody on those planes and in those buildings wished a few more people had over-reacted." He drank it like a shot and looked back in the cabinet, rooting through the remaining bottles like it was a crowded chess board.

Vic didn't think he was asking for a lot. He just wanted to see the FBI knock on his neighbor's door and ask a few questions. Stick their nose in. It wouldn't take ten minutes. A quick look around the guy's house. Maybe test the trunk of his car for explosives. Just do something.

He was down to the liqueurs. He grabbed the brown square bottle. Drambuie. Scotch sweetened with heather honey, flavored with herbs. He made a Rusty Nail and stood at the window, watching. His own little department of homeland security.

Vic had given Agent Phillips what – in light of recent events – he considered to be credible information. But had the man acted on it? No. Had he so much as bothered to come and interview this guy and the woman? No, he hadn't. So the question in Vic's mind was: *How can I get the FBI over here? What can I do to get Agent Phillips's attention?*

Vic found his idea at the bottom of the Rusty Nail, under the ice. Preemptive strike. He looked out his window again, like Gladys Kravitz on steroids, bug eyed and twitching. *Subtle's not working*, he thought. *These bureau guys need something they can get their bureaucratic minds around. Something more than a list of unexplained behavior that requires them to make connections that aren't obvious enough. The list I sent merely suggested terrorism. What I need is something that shouts it.* As Vic chewed on a piece of ice he thought, *You want terrorism? I'll give you terrorism.*

He grabbed the goose-necked bottle of Galliano, opened it, and gave it a sniff. Licorice. But not enough for a whole drink. So he mixed it with some ouzo and a little Sambuca as he thought back on something he'd written into one of his scripts after the Oklahoma City thing. He remembered the research. It was pretty simple. Yeah, he could do it. That would work.

It was dark when he staggered out to the garage. Under the work table, a dozen open sacks of fertilizer, some for St. Augustine, some for fescue, some for the vegetable garden. Perfect. He looked around for a container. Something to hold the thing, to *be* the thing. He picked up coffee cans filled with nails and screws and dumped them on the floor. They were too small. Paint cans were better, but still not enough volume. He settled on a big ice chest. It had a nice seal, almost airtight. Probably hold forty or fifty pounds of the mixture. With some duct tape, he thought it would work. In case of earthquake he had a can of diesel for a generator. He mixed it with the bitter fertilizer.

Coming on the heels of the anise-infused-Galliano-ouzo-sambuco mixture, the banana liquor was a refreshing change. Vic served it to himself in a frosted collins glass. It was sweeter than he expected, more like candy or medicine you didn't mind taking. He drank from a straw as he sealed the fertilizer-and-fuel mixture in the cooler using every inch of one hundred yards of duct tape. Being an intricate pattern, it took a little while.

The final problem would be rigging a booster to detonate the thing. A simple fuse wouldn't work. Vic remembered that much from his script. He'd need something concussive, a small explosion to trip the large one. Maybe gas fumes in a glass jar, set by a spark. Sure, why not? He stumbled back into the house to a jumbled closet filled with

dusty sports equipment, outmoded stereo gear, and other boy toys. He ripped the guts from a remote control monster truck that only turned right anymore. He crossed some wires hoping to cause a short.

It worked.



The bomb did everything Vic had hoped for, and more.

Three L.A.P.D. units were there within five minutes. The bomb squad arrived two minutes later, followed by a S.W.A.T. team, the fire department, and paramedics. Most of the neighbors stood on their lawns with their robes and their mouths open, wondering what had happened. The most popular guess was a natural gas explosion. But no one came out of the house across the street.

Several news helicopters circled overhead, their powerful cameras zooming in on the smoldering remains. There were newspaper and television reporters on the ground as well. One of the bathrobed neighbors was already negotiating to sell the home video footage he'd been shooting since the explosion.

Vic's name would definitely be in the news tomorrow. He would make the front page of both the *Hollywood Reporter* and *Daily Variety* as well as the *L.A. Times* and *The Daily News*. The DVDs of the movies he had written would soon be flying off the shelves. Two of his scripts, which had stalled in development, suddenly got green lights. He was finally one of Barry's biggest earners.

Agent Phillips, a stoic fifty year old, arrived and took charge of the scene. He was standing near the crater where the explosion happened. A guy from the bomb squad who was nearby gathering evidence looked over at him and said, "Do you smell... like... banana?"

Agent Phillips looked at him. "Funny you say that. I keep getting licorice." He tilted his head back and sniffed with his eyes closed.

"Huh." The bomb guy sniffed again. "Yeah, yeah, a little bit."

Agent Phillips told the paramedics they wouldn't be needed. "Coroner's on the way," he said.

"Hope he brings a spatula," was the paramedic's only comment.

Agent Phillips looked up and down the street, his suspicion aroused. Everyone on the block was standing outside their homes, except the people in the alleged sleeper cell. He began to wonder if Vic had been right.

As he crossed the street and approached the house, he saw a curtain fall back into place and the light in the front room went off. His pulse quickened. He walked up the circular driveway, to the door, rang the bell. After a moment when no one answered, he knocked with his fist.

A second later, a voice from the other side of the door said, "Yes?"

"Open up," Agent Phillips said. "FBI."

The door opened just a crack. A dark skinned man peered out, nervous and shifty. "Yes?"

Agent Phillips flashed his ID saying, "FBI. I'd like to talk to you."

The man's eyes darted back and forth, looking past Agent Phillips, as if for possible witnesses to what might happen next. He closed the door slightly and whispered to someone.

Agent Phillips slid his hand toward his gun. “Now,” he said.

“Okay, okay.” The man opened the door. “Come on in.”

Agent Phillips stepped inside and stared in cold disbelief at the phalanx of computers and electronic eavesdropping equipment filling the room. A listening station. He said, “What the hell?”

The dark skinned man reached inside his jacket and produced an ID of his own. “Agent Alvaro,” he said. “National Security Agency.” He gestured at a woman – presumably *the* woman – sitting at a computer, with headphones on. She wore a lot of make up and gave a cursory wave. “That’s Agent Raphael.”

Agent Phillips gave her a professional nod then looked to Agent Alvaro for an explanation.

“We’ve been watching this guy ever since he wrote that script about domestic terrorism.” Agent Alvaro crossed to a table stacked with files. “We have people inside all the networks, studios, and agencies keeping an eye open for anybody with, uh, subversive intentions.” He pulled a thick folder from the bottom of the pile and handed it to Agent Phillips. “See for yourself. That’s from the case officer who opened the file.”

Agent Phillips opened it and read. It described Vic’s script as, “*A nasty bit of treasonous propaganda, a blame-America-first narrative that painted the various federal security and policing agencies as inept bad guys, more concerned with budgets, political considerations, and protecting their turf than with protecting Americans. Possible security threat.*”

Phillips closed the file, shaking his head. “I had no idea. The guy said he was a writer, but...”

“Writers spread ideas,” Alvaro said. “And ideas can be dangerous. So we moved in. Tapped his phone, found out every library book he’d checked out, and started monitoring all his internet activity. You should see all the stuff this guy researches. Weird, off-the-wall stuff.”

Agent Phillips gestured at the eavesdropping gear and said, “So you guys knew that he’d called us, saying he thought you were a sleeper cell?”

“What?” Agent Alvaro tried to hide his embarrassment with some incredulity. “Well, no, we didn’t. Really?”

“Really.”

Alvaro sounded somewhat defensive when he said, “Well, obviously, we couldn’t listen to every single call the guy made.” He gestured toward the outside world. “We have to come and go like an average family, keep the guy from getting suspicious, you know? Of course, even if we’re not here the computer records and transcribes all the calls. Sooner or later, we’ll get around to reading all of them, you can count on that.”

Agent Phillips waved off his concern. “Listen, I understand how hard it is to do this without the necessary resources. We’ve been so swamped with tips, I haven’t had time to do any background checks on you guys. I mean for all I knew, you could’ve been a sleeper cell.” He peeked out the curtains at the emergency vehicles lining the street.

“Well, it’s a moot point now,” Alvaro said.

“Boy howdy. But listen, I’m curious about a couple of things,” Agent Phillips said. He asked Alvaro about some of the items on Vic’s list.

Agent Alvaro wagged a finger at the eavesdropping equipment and said, “Oh, well, I have to go out to the driveway to make cell calls because this gear screws up my signal.”

“He said you seemed pretty agitated during some of the calls.”

Agent Alvaro laughed. “Probably when I call my mom. She’s in Lisbon, going deaf, only speaks Portuguese. You have to gesture a lot.”

“He thought it was Farsi or Urdu.”

Agent Alvaro chuckled at that. “Hell, I don’t think we have two people in the agency who can speak Farsi.” Asked about the kids Vic had seen pitching the baseball, Alvaro said, “That was my idea, something to make us blend in. Keep him from getting suspicious.”

“Nice touch,” Agent Phillips said. “So now what? You guys pack up and move to another job?”

“No,” Alvaro said. “We’ve picked up a few things on some of the neighbors. E-mails, phone calls, whatnot, a surprising amount of anti-American, anti-government stuff. We’re going to stick around, keep an eye on ‘em for a while.”

Agent Phillips shook Alvaro’s hand. “These are scary times,” he said.

“Nine-eleven changed everything.”

“Be vigilant,” Agent Phillips said with a nod. “The enemy’s all around us.”

*Bill Fitzhugh writes satiric crime novels and the occasional mystery. **Pest Control and Cross Dressing** have been in development at Warner Brothers and Universal Studios respectively for nearly a decade. Imagine how good they’ll be when they’re done. **The Organ Grinders**, has been called the funniest novel ever to explore the feasibility of testicle transplants. Reviewing **Fender Benders**, *The New York Times* said, “Fitzhugh is a strange and deadly amalgam of screenwriter and comic novelist and his facility and wit, and his taste for the perverse, put him in a league with Carl Hiaasen and Elmore Leonard.” **Fender Benders** won The Lefty Award for best humorous novel of 2001. **Cross Dressing** was nominated for the Barry Award as well as the Salt Lake County Library System’s Reader’s Choice Award and it won the 2002 Best Fiction award from the Mississippi Library Association. Fitzhugh’s fifth novel, the political satire, **Heart Seizure** was published in March of 2003. Former Texas governor Ann Richards said “Fitzhugh can spin a story and skewer a politician better than just about anyone I know.”*

***Radio Activity**, the first of a comic mystery series featuring classic rock deejay Rick Shannon, was published in April 2004. The second novel in this series, **Highway 61 Resurfaced**, was published in April 2005. Unable to control himself after reading it, Carl Hiaasen said, “Bill Fitzhugh is a deeply disturbed individual who uses his warped talents to write very funny novels, the latest being **Highway 61 Resurfaced**. You will seriously dig this book if you like classic rock, Southern blues, clever mysteries and cats with loathsome sinus infections.”*

*Fitzhugh also writes, produces, and hosts a weekly segment on XM Satellite Radio’s Deep Tracks channel called “Fitzhugh’s All Hand Mixed Vinyl.” Fitzhugh, whose books have been translated into German, Japanese, and Italian lives in Los Angeles with his wife and his record collection. He is currently working on his next novel.*