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The Neighbors

By Mrs. Paul E. King

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Angela Dork woke early on Saturday. She didn't have to go to work because this and Sunday were her days off. The years of rising near six habited her body so that when the dawning sun peeped through the slats of her venetian blinds and the light warmed up and tickled through the sleeves of her gown, she awoke. For Angela, waking was a thing. She stretched her arms back and touched the headboard. Just before she opened her eyes, she sighed. Then she got up.

She slipped into her house slippers and pulled the blinds up, letting in the March light still slowed by winter's drag. Then she sat at the vanity, combing her long, thick, dark black hair until it shone with luster and life. She looked in the mirror as she combed and the face that looked back at her was clean and clear white, her skin pure, smooth and unmarked by cosmetics of any kind. Her blue eyes were set deep behind full, high cheeks, and her tiny chin balanced and sharpened the roundness of her face.

Two more months, she thought happily, then Alfred would be finished with his schooling and they would be married.

Angela looked around the room then sighed again. Next she washed her face, dressed and had her devotions. Then she got busy. She had so many things to do before the noon meal. She mopped and dusted, ran the vacuum cleaner, stopped long enough to eat a banana, washed the windows, took a chicken out of the freezer, cleaned some more, then took a bath. She did everything, even the cooking once she started, with the



**The house was hers;
it was debt free!**

same intense, too quick, too precise bustling around the big, empty house that was her parents' before they died-her father first, then her mother.

Cooking at the stove . . . the same one she had always remembered . . . brought Angela memories of her mother preparing big pots of stew and soup for her husband and her children: eight in all., four boys all with fight hair like their father; four girls all with silky-black hair like their mother.

As she added a slice of butter to the carrots warming on the back of the stove, the front doorbell tinkled melodiously through the house. Pushing the beets to the back of the stove beside the carrots (she was a lover of vegetables), she hurried through the hallway to the door, her small, slender figure moving with the grace of a swan.

Opening the door, Angela saw her next door neighbor.

"Oh, hi, Joan," she called, the notes of her voice soft and pleasantly-sweet. "Do come in,' she invited. "I was just fixing a bite of lunch; you know what a great breakfast eater I am."

"Like a bird," Joan declared flatly, stepping into the hallway and shivering slightly. "Honestly Angela, like I said before, I'd do something about this house. It's ancient . . ."

"Almost a century old," the dark-haired girl admitted.

"Look at this furniture!" Joan cried, stepping into the high-ceilinged living room,

Angela looked at the furniture: the two upholstered chairs which matched the rich chocolate-brown couch of no particular style; the three gold lamps with their rippling white shades, sitting straightly-erect on the end tables; the mantle and shelves fined with knickknacks and small porcelain and glass figures of people and animals arranged neatly in groups of two adults and three or four young., every one of them gifts of appreciation and love for her mother's kindness and charity; the long, sturdy, durable solid oak coffee table, handmade by her father and beautifully grained; a thickly-cushioned rocker, enormous in size and equally as durable and sturdy as the coffee table (another gift, one Christmas, from her father to his family). Next she looked at the tight yellow design of the curtains and noticed how smoothly and beautifully the color and the texture blended with the orange tones of the rug, giving the living room a cozy-warm appearance and feel.

"Why don't you get rid of this junk?" Joan asked bluntly. "It's ancient, Angela. Alfred will have some money for newer, finer things, I'm sure. But come, I have something to show you; I didn't come over here to try to sell everything out from under you at a single sweep. But I'd certainly make some changes . . . two rooms at a time. Oh, by the way, do you have a half dozen eggs I could borrow? And a cup of shortening, too? I haven't gotten to the grocery store this week and I need these things to bake one of Roy's favorite desserts."

Getting the eggs and the shortening, Angela followed her young neighbor through the front door to Joan's yard.

"Look, Angela!" Joan cried, clapping her hands together in ecstasy. "Roy bought it for us. Imagine!"

"A... a boat? But... but Joan, where will you use it? I mean, well, there's no water around here."

"Silly girl," Joan clucked, slapping a diamond-clad hand down on Angela's slight shoulder. "We'll go to the lakes. Dozens of our friends do this every week end. ' "

"But... but..., isn't that terribly expensive?" Joan threw her head back and laughed loudly. Sobering suddenly, she said, "Look, Angela, with credit anything's possible. Take it from there, and do something about that old house before Alfred's out of school. He'll love you for it. You do plan on living in it, don't you?"

"Why . . . why yes."

"Do something nice to it, Angela; it needs a total facelift..., inside and out. Well, thanks for the shortening and the eggs; you're a great girl."

Going back to the house, her appetite gone, Angela felt strange.

Sitting at the table nibbling her carrots and beets, she thought about Joan and what she had said about hers and Roy's way of living, too. They ate out once a day -- in exclusive eating places so Joan had told her more than once -- and they had a house full of all the newest, latest style furniture and electrical gadgets, two cars -- one a Lincoln -- plus a brand new swimming pool, installed just weeks ago. Joan dressed in all the latest, most fashionable and costly clothes, looking like a model for some exclusive fashion store when she went out. Roy, too.

Where did they get all their money? Angela wondered, remembering that Joan had let it slip once that her husband worked as a mechanic in some car place; and mechanics, Angela knew, didn't make the kind of money Roy and Joan were living so high on.

Credit! The word jolted her. But surely one couldn't live like her neighbors were living on credit alone! she thought. Sooner or later one's credit reached its limits. She herself had refrained from becoming "credit addicted," choosing, rather, to live within her means as her father and mother had taught each of them to do.

It was late one evening a week later, when Joan called her on the phone. "Please come over, Angela; I've got to talk to somebody. Somebody!" she exclaimed, sounding bitter and in tears.

"Of course, Joan; I'll be right over."

The drapes were drawn tight against the beautiful early March sunset. When Joan opened the door, Angela saw a person so totally different from the fashion-plate she had been used to seeing that she gasped in astonished shock.

"Why... why... Joan," she stammered softly, "What... what's wrong? All these boxes? and . . . and you've been crying."

"Don't add to my misery, Angela; we're moving."

"Mov . . . moving? Where? When?"

Joan laughed a cold, hard, bitter laugh. "That's a good question, my dear. Yes, a very good question. I suppose it'll be in with Roy's sister again . . ."

"A . . . again? What . . . do you mean?"

"We did it once before. Oh, Angela, I'm humiliated. Roy just called; he said the bank's taking over the house."

"But... why, Joan? Why?"

"Why?" the neighbor asked bitterly, gesticulating wildly with her hands, the diamonds on her fingers flashing bright in the well-lit room. "Why?" she repeated. "Because we're behind in our mortgage payments, behind on the cars, behind on the furniture, the appliances; behind, behind, behind! on everything! That's why! To be brutally frank, we must get out of here as quickly as possible . . ."

For a moment the room was full of silence. When Angela finally spoke, she sounded strained and unnatural. "But, Joan, how can you possibly manage on such short notice? What about a moving van? I'm sure you could get something in a couple of days."

"Are you kidding?" Joan moaned, dropping into the nearest chair and sobbing. "We haven't much to move. None of this stuff, so I've learned, really belongs to us. It's all been done with credit cards, and we simply haven't been able to meet the payments. I guess we overshot the mark."

Angela's heart ached; she wanted to cry. Credit cards. Credit cards! How terrible! she thought.

"Joan," she said, slipping over to where her neighbor sat in a beautiful cream colored overstuffed chair, "may I pray with you, please?"

Tilting her beautiful face upward and straightening her shoulders, the woman replied, "It won't hurt; but it won't help, I'm sure. But go ahead, Angela; you've always been such a sweet, innocent thing."

"Joan, listen to me; prayer will help. But you must want God to help you. I've prayed so often and so earnestly for you and Roy that you'd give your hearts to the Lord. Maybe this is His way of opening your eyes to your need of His love . . ."

"Get on with the praying, Angela," Joan interrupted bitterly, "but I'm not ready to change my life style just yet. Especially not since Roy pulled this same deal on me for the second time."

"Do you need help?" Angela asked when she had finished praying. "I'll gladly help you pack, Joan."

"Pack? I told you we'll not have much to move. Thanks, I can have these boxes filled in short order. Roy said we'll have to leave tonight; so this will be good-bye. Stay as sweet as you are..., always. You've been a great neighbor."

In her bed that night, Angela heard the car doors bang and slam next door. Going quickly to the window, she parted the venetian blinds and looked out. Joan paused for a brief moment beside the sleek, shiny Lincoln. Then, blowing a kiss toward Angela's house, she slid behind the wheel of the big car and drove away, her husband following in the Mercury van, both vehicles packed and loaded with personal belongings.

Weeping, Angela waved good-bye, hoping Joan saw.

Crawling between the crisp, clean-smelling sheets, her hands reached out above her head and touched the satin-smooth wood of the bed's headboard. The bedroom suite had been in the family for so long as she could remember. She had loved it as a child and young adolescent when she and her sister Mary shared its sturdy and durable dependability, and she loved it still. Perhaps even more so now. It was hers, and it was totally debt-free, with no credit card payments staring her in the face and no sleepless nights of wondering where that next payment was going to come from. Same thing with the house.

A smile tugged at the corner of Angela's mouth as she thought of the old house and Joan's stout declaration of its need of a "facelift."

"Poor girl, poor girl," she said half-aloud. "They have never learned God's secret of being content with such things as one has. Yes, even the simple things." Turning on her side, Angela was soon asleep.

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THE END