

Frederick and Sarah

by Ian Wolff

They'd driven the car there but had lost the keys so that it simply sat out in the yard, the yard of the house they couldn't leave because they'd lost the keys to the house as well as to the car, so they were kind of stuck. Their neighbors were kind, though, and they shared their pot of beans with them. On that first night, the beans were good, laced with smoked bacon. The neighbors were good. There were three of them: man, wife and child—a nine year old son whom they hoped to put to work as soon as he was able because the father was unable to work, having lost his legs from the knees down, and the wife was unable to work, having an inexplicable ailment they blamed on the methane in their drinking water, though they couldn't prove it, the necessary tests being too expensive, not to mention the legal fees. They tried not to take their frustration out on their nine-year-old son but sometimes they did and their neighbors, the ones who had lost their keys, often heard his cries late at night, like a barn owl noting its anthropomorphic remorse to the stars.

With times so tough, it's amazing there was even a pot of beans among them, but the camaraderie was comforting and gave them all hope and soon the boy's cries became a rarity, though still, on a full moon, if one listened, one could hear his childish invectives against the solemnity of the stars as if he was castigating their distance. The neighbors of the lost keys felt bad that they were eating their neighbors' beans without contributing anything, not even a child to the labor camp, where they would get credits, at least, toward more beans. So one night they decided to make love with the intention of conceiving a child. If you listened closely you could hear their cries, which sounded remarkably like the cooing of the columbidae in the dusk, though it was pitch black when they coupled, and so there wasn't any of that rosy glow that so inspired the plaintive call of the mourning dove, though in the couples' cries the plaintiveness of their coupling became all too clear to anyone bold enough to listen. The neighbors, however, stopped their ears with wax from their

camping candles, which forced them to extinguish them to get at the soft wax that they stuffed in their ears, and so they had to sacrifice the only source of light in their house since there hadn't been electricity in over a year. It was of no matter though; it was late at night and the family was ready to sleep on their soiled mattress, the three of them entwined like foxes in their den.

In the morning they rose and it occurred to them it was the tenth birthday of their previously nine-year-old son. "You're ten year's old now, son," said the father, placing his hands on his son's shoulders from where he sat in his wheelchair. The father was unconsciously puffing his chest out. His face bore a look of paternal pride with a hint of the shame that he felt at his helplessness and the fact that he was sending his son off to a labor camp. "You're still young," his conflicted face said, "but not that young—not so young that you should be excused from the labor camp. It's time, go forth." With that the boy's mother handed him a bag with a portion of beans for the journey. The boy stood there with a neutral look on his young face, looking now at his father, now at his mother, now at the bag of beans before he turned and made his way down the sidewalk in direction the memo from the camp directed him.

Meanwhile, neighbors-who-lost-their-keys had conceived. They were very proud. They sat to await the birth of their child, praying it would be a boy so that he could be sent to the camps as well, and maybe he would find the neighbor boy and maybe together they could form an army and save them all from the plight they found themselves in, because, as of now, there was no hope in sight. They couldn't picture any way to dig themselves out of the situation. The cards were, quite simply, stacked against them. Sure, they could picture a better life, one that included vegetables in addition to beans. Maybe some meat. Even a car to which they had the keys and in which might be able to take a drive. They assumed that somewhere people must still be going on about their lives as they had before, but imagine was all they could do. They discussed this in quiet voices behind the door to which they'd lost the keys for and so couldn't lock, at least not from the outside, which meant they

couldn't leave for fear of someone taking over their house. They could have locked the door from within and then snuck out through a window, leaving it barely cracked, but any intrepid home invader would have had only to check the windows before they found the breach in security. Besides, where would they go? They spent the next nine months discussing how things could be one day, sharing beans with the neighbors and promising that one day they would be able to contribute and it would be their turn to take care of the neighbors, who, after all, with their son away at the camp, the legs of the husband lost, and the wife with an inexplicable ailment likely due to the methane in their drinking water, had things much worse than the neighbors of the lost keys.

When their child was born, it was not a boy. But it was a very cute girl and so they entertained the hope that perhaps she would be able to be married to a well-off man, maybe one outside of the town that had become their prison. After all, it was outside of the town where any chance of improvement lied, for they were very familiar with their town—they had explored every inch of it right up to the barricades before they had lost the keys to their car. Sure, there were some areas, or zones, that were better than others, but theirs was relatively decent, neither as bad nor as good as it could be. But even the best within their town, or disbursement center, was nothing to write home about. So they'd contented themselves with the house without the keys, or the keys that they'd lost. But after the baby was born, they had a moment to reflect and the man asked the woman if she actually remembered ever having the keys in the first place. She wrinkled her brow in concentration. The man remembered how beautiful she was; how the first time he'd seen her she'd been playing beach volleyball and wasn't very good at it, but looked so gorgeous in her bikini and with her bronze skin; how he'd walked her home and she'd invited him into her bungalow, and how he was so impressed that she lived so close to the beach and had a bookshelf of amazing books by authors he loved, such as Aira, Baudrillard, Beckett, Bolaño, Bowles, Carver, Hernandez, James, Pynchon, Wallace, Welty, and many more; he he'd known then in that

single moment that he'd do everything he could to spend the rest of his life with her, come hell or high water. He'd been so distracted lately, he hadn't looked at his gorgeous wife very closely, not even when they were intent on conceiving their child. But now, as she wrinkled her brow, her cute nose puckering up and her full, maternal breasts pushing against her threadbare blouse, he couldn't help but be drawn to the moist spots on her chest where her breast milk seeped through. She swatted his hands away. No, she said, I don't know if we ever had the keys to this house. Maybe we simply adopted it, because it was certainly vacant, and no one's come to dispute our being here, so it's as good as ours. I wonder, said the man, if we could change the locks, or maybe we should look more closely for the keys. It would certainly be nice to go for a walk. We've been cooped up in here for so long I can't remember what the outside world looks like. Maybe we don't want to be reminded, said the woman. The man thought about that for a beat. He couldn't argue her point. But where had their books gone?

The neighbors' boy, on his eleventh birthday, was granted a one-day leave from the camp to visit his parents and celebrate his birthday. He had earned this because he was such a strong and faithful worker. His parents barely recognized him. His hair had grown long and his shoulders were broad, broad for an eleven-year-old. He'd grown a good several inches. They didn't skimp on the food at the camp, he reported. Things could be worse. They worked around 10 hours a day. They were expected to work energetically but there was none of that slave-driving that was rumored to go on there. No, the camp elders understood the worth of their workers and the limited numbers these days of able-bodied children who could even be put to work. There were reports of an outbreak to the East, which had put a sizable dent in their recruits. So, while they certainly weren't coddled, they were also treated in such a way to extend their worth as long as possible, which meant a steady diet of fruit and vegetables, and the occasional leave to visit relatives, assuming, of course, they didn't live in the East.

The neighbors' daughter took to the neighbors' son immediately. He hoisted the baby up in his arms like a man, despite his diminutive age. He held her with a masculine, almost possessive manner. The baby ran her hands through his hair and cooed at him with her moist baby smile. They seemed to be in love, but perhaps that was too strong a word for what passed between them. Then again, love is a mysterious thing.

After he tossed the baby in the air once or twice and handed her back to her mother, the baby never once took her eyes off the neighbors' boy until he left their yard and went back to his house and closed the door. She cried for ten minutes until her mother finally calmed her down with a spoonful of beans.

"You must grow up pretty and tall so that you can find a proper man who will be able to bring us beans for us to share with our neighbors. We can't live off their charity forever," said the mom. Her baby looked at her with the wise eyes of an infant.

The following year, the neighbors' boy returned and he was taller and stronger than before. He wore his hair in a long ponytail and he carried himself like a warrior. "We conquered the other camp," he told the admiring adults who had gathered around to welcome him. The baby, who was now called Sarah, toddled up to him and raised her hands indicating she wanted to be picked up. He hoisted her up and continued to recount the story of their conquest. They had surrounded the other camp, which had had ample defenses, but they were able to overpower them with their mortar fire. They had spent almost a year building their weapons in addition to their regular manufacturing and assembling jobs that kept them busy around the clock. Their masters had been very proud of them and they rewarded the neighbors' boy, who had been one of five leaders of the army, with a promotion and he now oversaw a group of 75 laborers.

"It's bad out there," the boy told them solemnly. They had made the march over 100 miles of rough terrain to reach the opposing camp. "The cities and towns are abandoned. You don't see anyone for miles and miles. No one knows where everyone went. All of our products go west. Supposedly that is where the main city is and

there seems to be no end to the demand for what we make, mostly phones. We aren't allowed to turn them on, though, so no one knows who is being called and what, if anything, is being discussed. Who uses the phones? That's the big mystery. Who's calling who?"

The adults listened intently. Maybe it's for the government, said one. I wonder how far it is to the city? Asked another. Should we try to go there? Would they welcome us? They all wondered out loud.

The neighbors' baby pulled on the neighbors' boy's ponytail. She put her hand on his cheek. He bit her hand with his lips. She laughed, pulled her hand back in mock terror and then patted him on the head.

"One day she'll be able to join me at the camp," said the boy.

"But she's a girl," said the baby's mother.

"They are accepting girls at the camp now. They've realized how important it is to include them. We are raising families there now. It's allowable and encouraged. Perhaps she could be my wife when she is old enough?"

"Oh, that would be splendid," said the baby's mother. "In 9 years time I believe she will be ready to join you."

Every year, the boy returned, taller each year until he reached 5 feet, after which, like all boys now, he stopped growing. But his muscles were more and more chiseled, and his back broader. Every year he embraced his future wife. And once she learned to talk they took walks together and discussed their future.

"We will have our own house?" his future wife asked.

"Yes," he said. I'm a leader now, so I get a special house. It has a kitchen and dining room. There is a bedroom with a big bed in it. There is a bathroom with hot water and a bathtub. You can take baths whenever you want!"

She clapped her hands in excitement. "And we can have lots of babies. I want lots of babies."

He admired her long silky hair and her delicate frame. "As soon as you're old enough," he said.

"When will I be old enough?" she asked, looking up at him with beseeching eyes.

"You're mother will decide. It's a woman's decision. I don't understand those things. I only know how to lead men and boys."

"Maybe I'll decide," she said, looking up at him with a wicked glint in her eye. He felt something stir in his loins. She was eight years old.

On her tenth birthday she was to accompany the neighbors' boy-who-was-now-a-man back to the camp.

"Frederick, I'm so excited," she said on the eve of their departure. They were sitting under a tree in a meadow. They had walked there to get away from the fuss of the adults who wouldn't leave them alone for a second. Frederick had his arm around Sarah. They had shared their first real kiss. Both of their lips were tingling. Sarah's cheeks were high with color. Frederick had an erection. Sarah could see it, but it scared her, so she looked away and pretended not to notice. Frederick diverted conversation to the mundane with the hope that his erection would subside.

"It's a gorgeous day," he said.

"Yes," she said. "The weather couldn't be better."

Finally, Frederick stood. "Let's head back," he said, reaching a hand out to help her up. "We leave early in the morning."

When she stood, she was already as tall as Frederick. Whatever freak of nature had caused men's height to top out at 5 feet hadn't affected women and girls. In fact, there was a notable increase in the average height of women. The latest generation of men had all grown to exactly 5 feet, whereas women ranged in heights from 5 feet to as much as 6 and a half feet. Sarah still had quite a bit of growing to do, and one day she'd tower over Frederick.

