

BLACKACKLE: Neighbors

written by Brittany Ackerman | October 14, 2019



I used to wait in my car for him to call. I'd sit in my parking spot outside my parents' building where I was staying and look at the moon, the trees, the lights lining the parking lot, in silence to see if he would call me back. Sometimes I left my writing workshop early just to see if he wanted to hang out with me. He never did.

My parents were happy I was back in school, but they didn't know I left class early to see David, that I spent nights at his house and lied, said I was working on a project with some girl from class. They didn't know there were no group projects in graduate school. They didn't know I was packing underwear in my purse just in case I stayed out, which was often. Parents will love you though, and hope for the best. They want you to grow and change and do better than you did before; my parents wanted me to do all these things. They didn't need to know I was at David's until four or five in the morning, eating late night Wendy's spicy chicken sandwiches, and hanging out at gas stations to buy condoms and cigarettes.

David had two years clean, but he liked to drink NyQuil or Benadryl to help him sleep. He also drank pre-workout shakes pretty much all the time. Some mornings I woke up to him covered in sweat for no reason. He always smelled like hot dogs. But I loved him because I thought he understood me, my problems. My brother had started using again and I wanted so badly for someone to pay attention to me. My parents were busy trying to get him back into treatment, so I had to seek elsewhere for what I wanted. David was hit or miss though. He was still in love with his ex, Maranda, who he got pregnant but she decided to have the kid with another guy. She moved to North Carolina and never spoke to him again. He prayed for their daughter every night, even though he didn't know her name.

I sat in the car and thought about how David was a good man, but a terrible boyfriend. He'd probably make some girl very happy one day. I knew it wouldn't be me. In the beginning, everything seemed so perfect, kismet, but then things took a turn when he realized I was insane. We were at Walmart

when I had one of my "fits." I couldn't talk, refused to move, just stood next to all the TVs and started crying, screaming, broke down hyperventilating. When we finally got home he said I should go and I acted like nothing happened. I thought *people get sad, what's the big deal?* and tried to get him to fuck me and he did, but still made me leave after, which is when I realized I wasn't the one.

I waited for an hour, then gave up and went upstairs. I took the elevator from the lobby to the tenth floor. As I got out of the elevator, there was a young guy taking a picture of himself on his phone in the hallway mirror. It was early, only 9:00pm, and he was probably going out for the night. I laughed.

"I like your shoes," I said since he was wearing silver Jordans. I really did like them.

"Thanks, beautiful. You live here?"

"No, I'm just the whore that visits the old people at night," I answered and he laughed. "I live with my parents, just temporarily while I'm back at school."

"Tight. I live with my ma'. I work finance and I'm helping her out right now. Her shitty boyfriend just left so she's alone."

"That's nice of you to help."

"I gotta meet some friends out. You coming?"

"Oh, thanks, but I'm tired. But, take my number, in case you don't get back too late." The truth was I didn't want to go out with this guy and miss a chance of getting a late night call from David. And I was kind of upset that he hadn't called me back yet. He was probably just playing World of Warcraft and ignoring my messages, or at a meeting if he was feeling virtuous. But I wanted to see him. I missed him and his brown eyes. I missed the way he held me in his sleep, the way he kicked during nightmares and woke himself up, woke me up too, told me he was glad I was there, called me his baby. It made me hopeful that maybe he forgot about Maranda, forgot about his real baby. But people don't forget the things they love, they only wander for a while before they meet themselves back inside themselves.

I took his phone and put my number in and added a little emoji of a blonde princess next to my name. He smiled when he saw it, got in the elevator, and went off. I walked down the hall of the tenth floor, opened the front door quietly, and snuck in. My parents were both asleep. I saw the TV was on, the bright lights illuminating their old faces in bed, both turned opposite ways away from each other. Their relationship was over and both of them were waiting to die.

I went to my room and put my notebooks on my dresser and the book I had to finish for fiction on my nightstand. My mom had put some gaudy Hawaiian print tablecloth over the nightstand, but I let her do what she wanted. Making up my room was the littlest joy I could give her. For class, we had to read this

book of short stories, love stories that never worked out. Someone's always too late or too excited or not a lesbian or from the wrong neck of the woods and each one ended really sad. There was one story called "Neighbors" about two kids who lived next to each other and fell in love, but the boy had some bone infection that was super painful all the time and he went crazy and jumped off the roof. The last scene was that the girl finds him and doesn't understand why her love wasn't enough, why she couldn't ease his pain. It seems like she's going to kill herself too, but the cops show up and we just get her looking at the officer's badge, the gleam of silver in her eye. I'm not sure, but I think the lesson was something about God, that even though there's all this pain and nothing makes sense, there's always a sliver of God, a shiny token of hope that maybe, it's possible, that life will go on.

I liked to sit in my closet at night because it was a walk-in and I could shut the door and turn on the light and be completely separated from the rest of the house. I did just that and got out my weed stash and a bottle of red wine I'd been nursing for a few days. I rolled a joint and smoked it in between sips of wine and checking my phone. I drank straight out of the bottle because I didn't give a shit. I changed into a hoodie and lace underwear because it felt sexy and I left the closet and lit a candle on the vanity. I didn't want to do any homework and I didn't want to call David but I wanted to will him to call me. I texted him again, which was not a good idea, but I did it anyway. I told him I was kind of drunk. He liked when I was drunk because I was more open to the things he enjoyed sexually. He liked to come on my face and I hated it but he really liked it. He also liked to stick a finger in my ass and I only let him do that when I was drunk. He was more rough when I was out of sorts. He felt like he was able to truly be himself because I was open and willing. But he didn't answer my text and I started to worry.

There was nothing I could do besides just go over there and see for myself. I knew if I did that and he wasn't into it, like if he got freaked out by my showing up, it'd all be over. Or, *or*, he could take it as a romantic gesture, *the* romantic gesture that could solidify our relationship. I was willing to take my chances. I started to get ready and packed my purse with underwear and threw on a pair of shorts and just then my phone lit up with a message. It was a kissing face emoji from an unknown number. I wrote back and asked who it was.

"It's AJ, your neighbor," he replied. "Sorry girl, I'm already faded."

"That's cool." I wanted AJ to like me and to want me. "When are you coming back?" I asked.

"Not for a bit."

"If you come back soon, I'll make it worth your while."

"Don't tease me."

"I'm horny."

“Fuck, I can’t just leave my boys right now.”

“Just come back.”

He stopped answering for a while. My chest hurt like it did sometimes. It’ll hurt when I take a deep breath. The pain moves from my breastbone to my neck in a sharp wave that only happens when I breathe in. If I take shorter breaths, it subsides, but stays dull, and it worries me, but it’s the kind of thing I can’t worry about for too long because I can’t make it go away. It once happened to me at a sleepover when I was fourteen and I cried and told my friend to get my mom because we were at my house and the girl laughed and told me to stop being a baby so I just went to the bathroom and sat on the floor and cried and asked God to take away the pain and eventually I started breathing normally and the sharp pain went away. The girl told me there was no way in hell she was going to wake up my mom just because I had some weird pain in my chest and I hated her forever after that.

But AJ wasn’t answering and David still hadn’t called me back, and the night was turning out the wrong way. I had some Valium left over from when I had laser eye surgery my senior year and took one, washed it down with some red wine. I put the cork back in the bottle and got into bed. I turned on the TV and put Bravo on mute and stared at my phone. I opened up the note app and typed out “DAVID DAVID DAVID DAVID DAVID DAVID” until my phone buzzed but it was only a text from AJ and it was just a stupid emoji with sunglasses.

I guess the Emmys were on last week and Bravo was doing some kind of fashion update, a recap of all the best and worst dressed actors and actresses, and I got so tired looking at all those gowns. I fell asleep to a silent sea of dresses. Maybe I should have just stayed asleep, rolled back over after I got the call from AJ at 2:30AM. For a second I got excited and thought it was David. When I picked up AJ told me he was on the way home and that it’d be cool to see me. The Valium had me feeling all strange, like strings were connected from my fingers and toes and I had to slowly move as to not tangle them. Each one was a different color, my pinkies were purple, ring fingers blue, middle green, pointer yellow, thumbs orange, and my heart center was red. My heart controlled all the strings and their movements.

I tried to snap myself out of it by taking a hit of my joint. I put on sweatpants and flip-flops and sat up in bed and waited for AJ to text me that he was home.

When he texted, he said to meet out in the hallway so we could go in together with less chance of waking up his mom. I knew I had to be quiet, so I held my flip-flops in my hand, put my phone in the waist of my pants, and headed out. I shut the door gently behind me. I saw AJ get out of the elevator and I walked to meet him. The elevator was in the middle of the hall and he lived down at the opposite end. He opened the door and we walked in. He directed me to his room and made a motion that his mother’s room was on the other side. We stayed quiet until we got to his room and he took off his shoes.

“Are you drunk?” I asked.

"I mean...I'm good. I can fuck, if that's what you're asking."

I sat down on his bed without him inviting me to. His bedroom had nothing in it of his own except his clothes and shoes. There was a framed painting of a flamingo above his bed, and other smaller framed paintings of fish and ocean things around the room. His bed had a sea foam green comforter and yellow pillowcases with coral accents. It was hideous and was hard to the touch. I laid down anyway and he took off his jeans and his shirt. He was muscular and his skin was freckled. He leaned in and kissed me and his skin was bumpy, but not from being cold, just rough. He felt that way all over.

He tried to go down on me and I said no, told him to go grab a condom. He got on top of me and moved fast and made grunting noises. It felt good to have a body on top of mine. It had only been a few days since I last had sex with David, but I still didn't consider this cheating since he wasn't really my boyfriend and I knew he was still in love with Maranda. If Maranda called David and said she wanted to work things out, he would go. He would give up his whole life here to be with her, which was sad, but the truth. The way AJ moved was fine, it wasn't anything special, or maybe it was because I didn't really know him, but I knew there was no way I could come, so I had to fake it. I looked out the window and saw nothing. I wanted to see the ocean, but it was too dark. When I started to moan, he told me to be quiet, but I wanted him to think I was coming, so I moaned more and he put his hand over my mouth. His fingers smelled like smoke and I was glad he hadn't put them inside me. I stopped making noise and looked up at him.

"Are you almost there?" I asked.

"Not yet, gorgeous," he said in between grunts.

"I want you to finish," I said, but in a sexy way, like a flirtatious way and not as annoyed as I was. I just all of a sudden didn't want to be there. He wasn't warm. It was weird to be getting fucked by someone I didn't know at all. I had never had a one-night-stand. I never had random sex. I didn't know why I chose to come here, why I chose to do this. But he came and grabbed onto me tight with a final few thrusts and then rolled off me, went to the bathroom to clean up. I rolled towards the nightstand and opened the drawer. The only thing inside was a Bible and a set of matches from a restaurant in Delray Beach called The Cuckoo's Nest. It was a little breakfast place that I knew well. It was baby blue and had birds everywhere, part of their theme. I had eaten there with my mom when I first moved back to Florida. I remember we got in a fight because she didn't want to order her own meal and wanted to share with me and I wanted my own food so she got an omelet and I got pancakes and both orders were barely touched because the portions were so big. There was so much food on the table and instead of being grateful we were so upset and we'd both been trained to turn sadness into rage so we took that anger out on each other and I threw a fit and walked out. I walked all the way to the car and on the way home we didn't speak a word to each other. We had always fought like this.

I took the matches and put them inside my bra. A keepsake. I thought that maybe my mom and I should go back there and have a better time. AJ came back

out of the bathroom and asked if I wanted to stay and I said no and I got dressed and he let me out the door. I never saw him again. It was weird because we lived on the same floor of the same building, but he never called and I never called and we never ran into each other again. I found him on Instagram and stalked his page once. He posted mostly selfies and lots of pictures at hotels and nightclubs in Miami and Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach. He had a silver grill that he wore sometimes. His pants were always too big.

I walked down the hall to my parents' apartment and noticed how quiet it was in the building. I wondered if anyone heard me moaning, if anyone cared. There are times that I wanted to be better, to move on, move forward. This was not one of those times. It was like I wanted to see what happened when you rode out your sadness, when you let it envelop you and overtake you, saw it out until the end.

I sat down in the hallway right outside my parents' door. I wasn't sure how I'd get back inside without waking them up. I wish I could say AJ was the last person I did this with. But there were others after him, many more. I also wish that David didn't later go off to marry Maranda after her husband beat her and their daughter and killed himself, drank himself to death in the middle of the day. Their daughter was the one who found him. He had choked on his own vomit. I really wish my parents loved each other, but they don't, and I guess there's really nothing I can do about that. I wondered if this was my way of trying to find myself. I slumped down against the door and checked my phone. I had a message from David. "Had to drive to Port St. Lucie to pick up a client. Took him to a treatment center in Boynton. Been such a long night. Couldn't answer. Hope class was good. I'm going sleeps. Let's see a movie tomorrow. Something scary. Haha. I love you baby."

Image Credit: *Frida Kahlo "My Dress Hangs There" (1933)*
