**Neighbour**

*Norman Yeung*

There are experts in the Indian family across the alley. They own a dump truck, a hulking pick-up truck that's too industrial-strength for consumers, and a Bobcat. And they fit them all in a driveway that would normally suit a Corolla and a Civic. Every evening is beeping when they back their giant machines into the squeeze. One of them stands in the alley as the guide, shouting in Hindi. They usually clog up this mid-alley and require some maneuvering in our driveway and another neighbour's, but no one minds because this is East Van and that's what we do. The shouts that I don't understand and the beep beep beep and the roar of diesel go on for five, ten, fifteen minutes... then silence. I look out my back porch and there are two trucks and a Bobcat neatly nestled like loaves at the baker's. The men say some more things in Hindi and I'm sure it's not "Good job veering to the left." They're probably saying, "Did you remember to bring the potatoes?" You see, experts don't need to congratulate each other or draw attention to their expertise -- they dust off their hands and get ready for dinner.

I've been amazed with their skill since they moved across from us about seven years ago. I would watch them do their evening machine exercise regularly as we ate dinner by our big glass patio doors overlooking the alley. Throughout the years and now still, my mom and dad and I like to utter our awe. It’s entertaining.

When they first moved in I wasn't sure about them. They seemed to be two families -- linked by brothers -- who lived in one house, grandparents included. They had young children, including a kindergartening boy whose pipes were manly; my mom would tsk-tsk, impressed, "Wow, that kid's got a mighty voice." The boy would often shout directions over the beeping -- he's got a practical voice. I liked that they were labourers. I liked that they had enormous machines. I liked that they were multi-generational. I liked that they had limited English. ...In this neighbourhood they would be one of us. But they seemed insular at first, as any family would be when moving to a new neighbourhood where we are familiar with each other's crappy underwear drying on laundry lines. And yes, some of those boxers and panties are home-made (or maybe it's just *my* family’s). The Indian family kept to themselves and their hard work -- we had little access to their personality and zero access to their history. And one night I called the cops on them.

They had been living across from us for only a few months, so we certainly hadn't developed trust. They might have been throwing a party -- maybe it was a house-warming. Their driveway had cars rather than trucks that night, and some male guests were hanging out. Probably in their late-twenties. Probably drunk by the way they were jostling and laughing too loud. It was maybe 1AM and I'm not sure my neighbours -- the ones who lived there -- were in the scrum of men. Hard to tell and I didn't know them yet. When they started arguing, I turned off all the lights so I could spy without my silhouette. When their laughs transformed into snarls, and jostling grew into shoving, I grabbed the cordless. When one of them waved a black object in the air with his fist, I called the cops. I made sure that our gauzy kitchen curtains didn't quiver when I parted them to peek. I kept a finger over the phone's red "on" light. I was kept on the line to describe what I was seeing: eight to ten men, maybe party, maybe drunk, definitely arguing, definitely about to scrap, definitely thing in man's hand. Most of the men were trying to calm down the adversaries. The operator told me that I would hear a knocking at the front door and then the door knocked. A female cop in plain clothes was there and instructed me to keep the front door unlocked in case they needed access through my house. She disappeared down the stuccoed side of our Vancouver Special to observe. No sirens rang and no cop cars drove into the alley. Pure stealth. The operator told me there were police in the vicinity and she let me get off line. I went back upstairs to spy some more from the patio glass. The men were tense but calmer. Lots of talking. More talking. Then I got bored. I'm not sure the cops ever confronted the men. I'm not sure they did more than keep watch. The men sorted themselves out. Good thing no one got killed.

After that night the family returned to routine and wove their way seamlessly into our neighbourhood's fabric. I moved away before getting to know them, but whenever I was back home I would rejoice that their young children were tricycling and playing basketball in our alley, as I had. Their youth had been missing from our block for years, as all the kids I grew up with traded in hockey sticks and rollerblades for compact cars and degrees. They were the new blood, the kids across the alley, alternating between shouts in English and in Hindi. On one spring visit I recall the boy with the pipes kicking a ball around with my two-year-old nephew. The boy and his little sisters were likely among my nephew's first friends. Every time I visit I find myself standing at the patio glass watching the men's expertise, their beep beep beep signalling to me that I'm home. A few days ago I was watching and my mom said to me, "They're really nice."  
  
Today I saw my neighbour come out of his garage holding a beat-up broom. I wondered what the hell he was gonna do with that dinky thing when our city was completely whited out with impossible snow. Moments later he and two men -- one was probably his brother who lived there -- were digging their monster vehicles out from the snow with diesel pumping and Bobcat scurrying. I had just spent over an hour with my Dad digging out our Sentra -- which I had got stuck only ten metres from our house -- simultaneous to a mini van up the alley that eventually freed itself after thirty minutes of burning rubber. And here were our neighbours, Bobcatting that snow away like my mom parting flour to make cake. Amid our blank white block was this black patch of asphalt that was their driveway. Then the patch of driveable land grew as they cleared the bit of alley that we shared, and then they cleared a neighbour's driveway. The boy with the pipes joined them. He's now thirteen and man-sized. They loaded the Bobcat onto the truck and re-arranged their vehicles back into their de-snowed yard with much beeping, all items once again tidily organised with a white dusting on top like icing sugar. At this point my mom was admiring our alley view and said, "Look at the roofs, so white, so beautiful. Let's take a picture," which of course means a picture with her in it. She darted to her closet to pick out an appropriate hat. She came out with a beret. With glowing smile she chimed, "Make sure you get me with all the rooftops behind." When she got to the patio glass, her smile became mixed with frown and her cheeks hummed red. She slid open the patio door and shouted, "Thank you!" and waved. Our Indian neighbours were clearing our driveway with shovels. My mom turned to me and mused bashfully, "We can't be taking *pictures* right now. That would be rude."