

Most parents are reluctant to let their children stay home by themselves. When Paul's parents finally decided to let him stay alone, it was an experience that he'd never forget.

## “Next Door”

By Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

The old house was divided into two dwellings by a thin wall that passed on, with high fidelity, sounds from either side. On the north were the Leonards, on the south were the Hargers.

The Leonards husband, wife, and 8 year-old son had just moved in. And aware of the wall they argued in a friendly way as to whether or not the boy, Paul, was old enough to be left alone for the evening while his parents went to a “certain” movie. The why of their not wanting Paul to see certain movies, certain magazines, certain books, certain television shows was a mystery he respected.

“I’ll be all right, “ said Paul. He was very tall for his age and thin, and had a soft, sleepy, radiant sweetness engendered by his mother. “What could happen to me here? I’ll be fine.”

### *Pause*

Soon after Paul's parents left, the radio in the Harger's apartment went on. It was on softly at first – so softly that Paul couldn't make out the announcer's words. The music was frail and dissonant – unidentifiable.

Gamely, Paul tried to listen to the music rather than to the man and woman who were fighting.

The voices of the man and woman were getting louder, drowning out the radio. The woman was shouting now! The man was shouting something awful, unbelievable. All at once it was all quiet next door – except for the radio.

Now the fighting was beginning again – louder and louder, crazy and cruel. The woman shouted again, a high, ragged, poisonous shout.

Paul stood, shaking, wanting to shout in terror and bewilderment. It had to stop. Whatever it was had to stop!

Paul heard the clicking of the woman's heels across the floor. The radio volume swelled until the boom of the bass made Paul feel like he was trapped in a drum.

"And now," bellowed the radio, "Remember if you have a dedication, call Milton 9-3000 and ask for All-Night Sam, the record man."

The music picked up the house and shook it.

A door slammed next door and someone hammered on the door. A prickling sensation spread over Paul's skin: he faced the truth: The man and woman would kill each other if he didn't stop them.

He beat his fists on the wall. "Mr. Harger! Stop it!" he cried, "Mrs. Harger! Stop it!"

Next door, crockery smashed, filling a split second of radio silence. And then a tidal wave of music drowned out everything again.

Paul stood by the wall, trembling in his helplessness. "Mr. Harger! Mrs. Harger! Please!"

"Remember the number!" said All-Night Sam. "Milton 9-3000!"

Dazed, Paul went to the phone and dialed the number.

"I wonder if I might make a dedication," said Paul. "From Mr. **Lemual K.** Harger to Mrs. Harger, the message is 'I love you, let's make up and start over again.'"

The woman's voice was so shrill that it cut through the din of the radio.

Paul dropped the phone into its cradle. The music stopped and Paul's hair stood on end.

"Folks! I've been asked to bring a man and his wife back together again," said Sam. "I guess there's no sense in kidding ourselves about marriage! It isn't any bowl of cherries! There's ups and downs, and sometimes folks don't see how they can go on."

### ***Pause***

Paul was impressed with the wisdom and authority of Sam. Having the radio turned up made sense now, for Sam was speaking like the right hand of God. When Sam paused for effect it was still next-door. All ready the miracle was working. "And," said Sam, "If I've learned one thing from working with all of you wonderful people out there,

it's this: if folks would swallow their self-respect and pride, there wouldn't be any more divorces."

A lump grew in Paul's throat as he thought of the beautiful thing he and Sam were bringing to pass.

"...And now, for Mrs. **Lemual** K. Harger, from Mr. Harger – I love you! Let's make up and start all over again." Sam choked up.

The radio went off next door. The world lay still.

A purple emotion flooded Paul's being. Childhood dropped away, and he hung, dizzy on the brink of life, rich, violent, rewarding.

There was movement next door. Slow, foot-dragging movement.

"So," said the woman, "you want your wife back? All right, I won't get in her way. She can have you."

There were three gunshots.

Paul jumped into bed, and pulled the covers up over his head. In the hot, dark cave of the bed, he cried because he and All-Night Sam had helped kill a man.