

The First Two Pages of “A Six-Letter Word for Neighbor” by Lisa Unger

From *When A Stranger Comes to Town*, edited by Michael Koryta

(Hanover Square Press)

An Essay by Lisa Unger

I’m an intuitive writer, so I don’t do a lot of planning or plotting before I approach the page. I have a voice in my head, some kind of loose vibe about where we’re headed, and a little bit of excitement to find out more about the person I’m hearing. This is true of novels and short stories, things I’m asked to write, as well as things that spring up organically.

I loved Michael Koryta’s idea of “a stranger comes to town” for the MWA anthology, because the possibilities are endless and because it’s an essential truth of life, isn’t it? You’re just hanging around and someone you’ve never met shows up. Could be good news: Love at first sight! Could be bad news: Serial killer!

So for “A Six-Letter Word for Neighbor,” I just had Michael’s prompt in my head. It kicked around a while, peeking out of my subconscious when I was on the treadmill, or cooking dinner, or maybe stuck in another narrative. I had a few thoughts like: Where are the stakes highest for a stranger showing up? What’s the worst thing that could happen? Eventually, I settled on a pleasantly unpleasant, very general direction, one to which everyone can relate: a bad neighbor.

Not long after that, I started hearing Jay's voice. A reclusive writer who definitely has problems—don't we all?—is just minding her business, doing the crossword on her front porch, when a moving van comes rumbling into view.

The moving truck comes first. I'm having coffee on the porch, doing the crossword in the morning paper, when the large vehicle lumbers up the street, rattling the manhole cover and scaring the birds from the branches of the oak trees that line Marbury Lane.

I try to ignore the racket, focus on the clues. But the truck's progress is distracting, a halting stop-go, stop-go. I finally put down the puzzle. The truck slows, gears grinding, then picks up speed for a few yards, finally coming to a noisy stop at the house next to mine.

Great. New neighbors.

The story is all about Jay, told from her perspective, written in first person, present tense. This is by far the most intimate way to tell a story. Again, it's not so much a choice, but simply the way her voice asserted itself. And so we only have Jay's voice, however flawed, and her vantage point, however limited, to explore her surroundings. Her commentary, her word choice, her tone will communicate everything about scene, plot, and character. I was intrigued by her right away. Her crossword puzzle, her morning, her cranky observation of the truck, and the flat way she thinks: *Great. New neighbors.*

I wanted to know more about her. And if I want to, I hope that means the reader does as well. That's usually how I gauge how interested people will be in my story and my characters, by how deeply involved *I* am, how much *I* want to know what will happen next.

By the beginning of the second page, we know that Jay's former next door neighbors left in the middle of the night, that there was no love lost, and that Jay has adopted their abandoned dog Scout who now lies at her feet. There are a thousand layers of character here. That her crankiness is a bit of a façade; obviously she has a soft heart if she took in an abandoned dog. That she's an observer, someone interested in words, in the world, in people. Otherwise, she wouldn't be able to offer us this kind of perspective:

Number 235 has been pleasantly empty for the last year since its owners left it to foreclosure. The property, a rundown Craftsman with a postcard-sized front lawn, is a study in what happens when a place is abandoned. Nature takes back what belonged to it all along, reaching out with her green-brown fingers, pushing through boards and concrete. The mailbox tilts, paint peels, eaves sag. The grass is as tall as a toddler. Weeds spring up between the slats of the porch. Birds nest in the gutters, flit through the trees. Squirrels run amok.

The family who used to live there, a youngish couple, with two dark-haired skinny boys and a mangy brown dog, weren't exactly ideal neighbors. Their name escapes me—something with a lot of consonants. Even though we barely spoke, just a cordial nod at the mailbox or a wave as one of the boys rode by on his bike, I got the sense that they didn't like each other much, any of them. Unhappiness has a frequency, doesn't it?

Another thing I noticed about Jay here was that even though she acts annoyed by the distraction, she doesn't go inside to finish her puzzle. She continues watching. She's curious about the new neighbor.

Enter Jay's *other* neighbor, Ralph:

The truck sits, two men in its cab, one of them on the phone. I watch a moment, return to my puzzle. What's a four letter word for nuisance? Pest, I think. I'm confident enough to write it in.

“New neighbors?”

Can a person not do the crossword in peace?

Ralph my neighbor from the other side stands at the border of our lawns.

“Looks like it,” I say easily. I do try to keep my equanimity.

“Maybe you’ll get a cat out of the deal.” He guffaws at his own joke. He is a big guy, tall, muscular, with a thick, lustrous head of dark hair, a full beard. Men do that now, don’t they? Grow these long beards. Today he wears a flannel shirt and jeans. Is he going for a lumberjack look?

I wasn’t really expecting Ralph. So I was interested when he turned up. Jay is not overjoyed to see him. And yet they seem to have an easy rapport, knowledge of each other. She’s making fun of him a little. But by the next page, he’s getting a cup of coffee from her house. So what’s going on with these two? What’s their relationship? How will it figure into to whatever will happen with the new neighbor?

At this point in the writing, I have no idea. But that’s the joy of it. Because I’m dying to find out, and I hope my readers are, too.

#

Lisa Unger is a *New York Times* and internationally bestselling author. With books published in twenty-eight languages and millions of copies sold worldwide, she is widely regarded as a master of suspense. Her latest release is *Confessions On The 7:45*.

Unger’s critically acclaimed books have been named on “Best Book” lists from the *Today* show, *Good Morning America*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *People*, *Amazon*, *Goodreads*, and many others. She has been nominated for, or won, numerous awards including the Hammett Prize, Macavity, Thriller Award, and Goodreads Choice. In 2019, she received two Edgar Award nominations, an honor held by only a few authors, including Agatha Christie. Her writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *NPR*, and *Travel+Leisure*. She lives on the west coast of Florida with her family.