



Corbitt Nesta

Responsibility and Corruption on Elm Avenue

Maybelle said she wouldn't be coming with me to the library. I asked why, and she said she could get all the short stories she wanted off the Internet. Saved walking all the way to the library, and putting up with my chatter on the way there, and on the way back. Maybelle is very direct like that, always has been.

"But, Maybelle, we've been walking to the library every Monday for the last fifty years!" She said, "Why don't you get Internet? We can send each other emails."

So I had to get Internet. I called the local high school. They said they'd send me a good student to tell me all about computers and such.

Diabolical thing, this Internet. Makes you lose old friends, forces you to learn newfangled ideas, even if you're too old. But Maybelle said you have to be modern; otherwise, you're dead. Your synapses start clogging up, getting lost, disappearing. You end up like Nancy next door. Perky little Nancy, prom queen sixty two years ago. Now she's wandering around Elm Avenue in her nightgown and spitting at the postman.

The kid came the next day. Tall skinny black kid, by the name of Arsenius, said his consultation would cost me.

I said, "All right. As long as I get Internet."

"You need a computer, then you need to get hooked up," he said.

"Let's buy a computer and get hooked up, then."

"How much you want to spend?"

"Whatever it takes."

"How many rams you want?"

I wasn't going to show him my ignorance, so I said, "Whatever it takes."

"Let's go to the mall. You got a car?"

"In the garage."

When I opened the garage door, he gasped. Daddy's car is still there, a '57 Chevy. I never drive it. Walk everywhere.

I said, "Let's walk. It's only a mile or so."

He said, "Let's drive. Don't want you fainting on me in this heat."

"Young man, I don't faint, never have. We're walking."

I'm used to going everywhere on foot. And about once every six months, Maybelle and I walk

to the mall. It's not far. She stocks up on perfumed candles, and I buy crackerjacks for the great-grandchildren's visits, then we go to the Applebee's and have lunch. Nancy used to come with us, but not anymore.

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"I get paid by the hour," he said. "Walking will cost you a lot more. Also, you feel like carrying a computer a mile or so? 'Cause I'm not."

I could tell he was dying to drive that car. Daddy would have said, no seventeen year old punk driving my car. No way. But Daddy's been dead twenty years, and this child was trembling inside, just jelly-like, wanting to drive that car. I figured I'd get more consultation out of him if I let him.

Arsenius got into the driver's seat. He looked excited, but a little intimidated.

"There's plenty of gas."

"I know, I gassed up a few years ago."

He jumped out, grabbed a rag from the rag bin and started cleaning the windshield.

"Is wasted time costing me?" I asked.

"I'll give you a small discount," he said.

Arsenius drove like he was piloting Apollo One. His big pink knuckles tight on the steering wheel, he sank low in his seat, checked all the parameters, as he called the buttons, revved up the motor, and backed very slowly out of the garage.. all with a little secret smile on his face. Captain Arsenius, off to Mars in his '57 Chevy.

"What store we going to?"

"Media World, they got the best prices."

I knew that place. Bought a new tv there a few years ago. Nancy was my consultant back then. She said, get a big one, never can tell when you'll get macular degeneration. It was an infernal place, lights popping on and off, rock music on one side, fifty tv sets on the other, all on different stations, kids in blue shirts rushing around with gadgets in their hands. Associates, they called them.

Media World was the same as back then, only now there was a big computer section. And Arsenius seemed to know all the 'associates'.

"How many rams you want?" Arsenius shouted over the din.

"What's a ram?"

"How much info you want. How many bytes."

"Bites? "

"Little bits of info."

"Look, I just want Internet." Nancy would have said get the big one, get the most. You never know when your teeth'll start falling out.

"The most," I said.

Arsenius approved. You could tell from the twinkle in his eyes. He called the cute little associate over. She looked to be about twelve years old and had green beads in her dyed orange hair. Arsenius announced he wanted the most rams. Only he didn't say 'the most rams'. He ran through lots of letters and numbers, all in one breath. The associate looked very impressed.

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Ten minutes later I was at the cashier's, writing a check for an unbelievable amount of money, the same amount I paid for an entire antique bedroom set thirty years ago. Daddy would not have approved, but after all, he's dead, and I don't want to lose my friend Maybelle. Internet is the future, she said, and of course, we all want a future. Even when you're eighty years old.

Several blue clad associates loaded up the Chevy with the computer, mouse, hard disk, a cd burner, software and other incomprehensible things. Arsenius said he would explain later. We drove home, slowly, so as not to joggle the computer, he said. Actually, Arsenius could not stand the thought of getting out of that car. He was like a five year old with a slurpy, taking one slow lick

at a time, to make it last.

Arsenius unloaded the Chevy, dropped all the boxes on the kitchen table, said he had homework and would be back the next day.

By the next day, I had it all figured out.

"You give me free consultation and Internet lessons for as long as it takes. 'Til I can send emails to anybody," I said.

He was sitting at the kitchen table, his huge hands draped over the computer, his big brown eyes roaming over all the gadgets spread out there.

"In exchange for?"

"You can drive the Chevy for four hours every Saturday night."

"Cool, man!" His eyebrows shot up, his smile stretched in a second all the way across his face. His ears wiggled from being displaced. Then he shut down his enthusiasm. The kid was no fool.

"You pay for gas," he said, looking very business-like.

"And you drive me to the supermarket. One hour, anytime, every Saturday."

"Done."

We shook hands over the computer, and Arsenius started plugging things into other things.

It took him quite a while to explain rams and bytes and Mac and Windows and Bill Gates. It was interesting and all, but I said after a week, "When are you going to teach me how to send an email?"

"All in good time," he said. Now where did a kid who went to Dumm Dumm High, as Maybelle calls our local high school, get a phrase like that, 'all in good time'? Maybe Arsenius read books?

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"Do you read books, Arsenius?"

"When I have time."

Arsenius, it turns out, didn't have much time. In bits and pieces, over the next months, I gathered what Arsenius's life was like. He was the eldest of five kids from three different fathers. His own father was long gone, his mother was only thirty-four years old and on welfare. They lived in subsidized housing in the worst part of town. His mother was often sick. What her illness was, Arsenius didn't say, but I could guess. He had a Saturday morning job. He kept up with his homework. He read books on Sundays after church, and after taking his brothers and sisters to the park to play, and after organizing his mother's medicines for the week.

"What're you reading now?"

"Conrad."

"Which one?"

"Nostromo."

"What's it about?"

Any other kid would have told me the plot.

Arsenius said, "Responsibility. Corruption."

He didn't waste words. Or time. Except when he was teaching me computers. It took us two weeks to get down to doing email.

Responsibility and corruption. The question in my mind now was, was it a good idea to give him my car four hours a week? Would he buy his mom drugs in my car? Would he visit the local whore house in my car? Would he drag race my car? Should I ask? I decided to try and trust him. He was a smart kid doing his best; he deserved a little trust. Maybelle didn't agree.

That first Saturday, he showed up in the afternoon, and we went to the supermarket. He did his family's shopping while I did mine. Without asking, he dropped car soap, car wax, Windex, two chamois, car oil, and car perfume into my shopping cart.

"What's this?"

"Can't have your Daddy's car driving 'round town dirty."

The kid could read me like a book.

He carted my groceries into the kitchen and said,

"Why don't you practice on Windows while I wash the car?"

He had a change of clothes in his satchel. I admit I had a little peek inside. There was a freshly washed pair of blue jeans, a white tee shirt, and a grey hooded sweat shirt. All ironed and sweet smelling .

I could hear the water running in the driveway. After a quarter of an hour, I had a quick look. Arsenius was drying the wheels with the chamois. The Chevy had not looked that good for at least twenty years.

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He opened the kitchen screen door and said he was finished. I said, "You can use the downstairs bathroom to change."

His eyes flitted to the satchel on the table, then to me. He smiled.

"Thanks."

Ten minutes later he reappeared from the bathroom, looking so clean and fresh and young and innocent, I wanted to hug him. And I wanted to tell him about young black men's lives today. I read *Time Magazine* every week, and I know. Gang murders, drugs, jail, disease, an early death, that was what was waiting for him, unless he was careful. But it was obvious he was going courting. And he wouldn't have listened to an old white lady anyway.

"Now you be careful with my car. No more than 50 miles per hour. You be back here in four hours, no longer. Hang the keys on that hook. I'll be in bed by then."

"OK." That 'ok' grated a bit. Forty years ago, anybody under twenty speaking to any lady over forty would have said 'Yes, ma'am'. But it didn't matter. Arsenius was happy; he literally bounced to the car, he was so ecstatic. He waved backhanded on his way down the driveway, driving slowly, ever so slowly.

I heard the garage door open again, exactly four hours later.

One week later, I sent my first email to Maybelle. I wrote:

"HAH! You're not the only one with email! Your friend, Helen."

She wrote back, "Good. You've saved at least two million synapses this week. Sign up for the gardening newsletter at www.mygardening.org. It's groovy."

Groovy?

It took Arsenius another two weeks to teach me the World Wide Web. That's what www stands for. I signed up for the gardening newsletter, which meant I was getting two emails a day, one from Maybelle and one from gardening. So I signed up for more newsletters, one on cooking, one on horoscopes, one on taxes, one on old age, one on cancer. I never read the one on cancer, too depressing, but it did count. And I signed up for the water skiing newsletter. I was a water skiing champion back in the fifties, you know. That made eight emails a day, which took most of the morning to read thoroughly.

Maybelle, even when she was a youngster, always had to be first, of course. She was the first to get married, the first to have children, the first to buy a house, the first to be widowed, the first to try Internet. But she wasn't a water skiing champion. And she wasn't getting eight emails a day, for sure.

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Arsenius said I was getting really good at signing up for things.

However, Maybelle was the first to send emails with pictures, which really miffed me. Always out there in front, that's Maybelle. She sent me three pictures of her prize gardenias. They were clear so you could see the morning dew on their creamy white petals. Arsenius said you had to have a digital camera to send pictures, or a scanner, which was cheaper. We went to Media World and bought a digital camera.

Arsenius said it would take a while to learn to use a digital camera. And then how to download

and upload, which sounded vaguely racy.

I said, "OK."

Arsenius and I spent the next month clicking away at everything...all the flowers in my garden, spiders, snakes, ladybugs, and at the supermarket, square pumpkins and weird shaped eggplants and Ruth Ann, the cashier, and of course every angle of the Chevy. Then Arsenius took pictures of me, and I took pictures of him. We uploaded and downloaded, and I sent Maybelle a picture a day. She was impressed and started asking my advice on cutting and pasting and fancy framing for her digital pics. I was ever so accommodating and explained all the fine points on the phone, every night after the news.

That's when Arsenius asked if he could email a few of his "portraits", as he called the pictures I had taken of him, to his new girlfriend, Lavinia. Mind you, Lavinia used dime store perfume. I could smell it in the car. It was a heavy, musky scent forty year old prostitutes might use. I knew right away Lavinia was not the right girl for Arsenius, but kept my mouth shut. Until he started receiving pictures of Lavinia. He showed them to me, proudly. This girl/woman was his first girlfriend, you could tell; he had been too busy with his school, his family, his work to go seriously courting before. But now he had a car. My car.

My suspicions proved to be entirely correct. Within days, Arsenius started talking about buying a color printer. Media World delivered a color printer. Then three pictures of Lavinia appeared on my desktop, and were duly printed, five copies each. In the first, she was dancing in a bar and there were older white men leering at her in the background. In the second, she'd got herself up as a gypsy for Halloween. Gold jewelry hung from her ears, her neck, her arms, her hands, her ankles and all of her toes. There was a come-hither glint in her sultry eyes. In the third, Lavinia was curled up on a sofa, surrounded by five or six big black kids, all in sweatshirts, hood up, huge jeans and giant laceless tennis shoes. Not one of them wasn't sporting nose and ear rings, and numerous gold chains.

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"Lavinia must have a good job to buy herself all that jewelry," I said, trying to sound positive.

"She don't work."

"Doesn't," I said. It just popped out.

"So she's still in school?" I continued. That Lavinia was a student seemed unlikely, since she looked to be at least twenty-five.

" No, she stay at home. She look after her mom. Her mom sick."

" Oh," I said. I almost said, "stays, looks, IS sick", but stopped just in time. I could tell from his face he was just waiting for me to say those words.

"You were going to say," stays, looks, IS sick," weren't you?" Arsenius said, his voice low and tentative.

"Yes, I was, Arsenius. And I'll tell you why."

"Tell me," he said, a sarcastic smirk on his face.

"You're better than this, Arsenius. You speak good English, why pretend you don't? You read Conrad. You're college material. Don't ruin it all now, just because of a girl."

"I ain't ruining nothing. Lavinia Jones my girlfriend."

He stood up to go.

I grabbed his arm. He twisted away from me, but didn't move from beside the computer.

"And let me tell you what's going to happen next, young man," I said. "Your girlfriend Lavinia will get pregnant. On purpose, because you're a good catch. You're educated, smart, good-looking. She'll refuse to have an abortion. You'll be taking care of her and her family and yours for the rest of your life. Or maybe not. Maybe, you'll get tired and decide to be one of the hordes of black men ignoring their children, and feeling guilty. Responsibility and corruption. You'll be a druggie or a drunk within five years. Just like....."

"Just like my father," he said, and he spit on my kitchen floor.

"Yes."

"You ain't even read Nostromo," he screamed.

He turned and ran out the back door, slamming the screen door in my face.

Nobody, and I mean nobody, slams my own screen door in my face. In a second, my face turned hot as the hinges of hell.

"Nostromo has nothing to do with it!" I screamed at his retreating back. He didn't turn around. "You're fired, Arsenius! Don't come back here. Ever again."

That Sunday morning I found "Racest Bitch!!!" scrawled all over my garage door, in red, orange and black. Arsenius wasn't the culprit. His spelling was better than that. Maybelle said Arsenius' future brothers-in-law must miss my Chevy. Maybelle isn't often wrong.

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A week passed. There was no word from Arsenius. I decided to phone him the next Monday, not to apologize, just to make contact. On the Sunday morning, Maybelle phoned.

"Look at page two in the morning paper."

I ran out to the mailbox and grabbed the paper, opened it to page two and saw the article.

"Brawl at Elm and Oak Intersection "

My street! Not fifty yards from my house. And I hadn't heard a thing.

"Saturday night at 11PM," the article read, "an anonymous caller reported a brawl at the intersection of Elm and Oak. The police arrived three minutes later and after a short pursuit, arrested one Harley Jones, 21, of Meadow Housing Project. Other participants fled and were not apprehended. Police found Arsenius Jackson, 17, at the scene, unconscious and bleeding profusely. He was taken to Riverview Hospital Emergency Room."

Maybelle and I skipped church that morning and walked to the hospital. Arsenius was in intensive care. He had been beaten mercilessly, his head pounded on the pavement several times. The doctors said there was hope, but not much. His mother was not there. Lavinia was not there.

Maybelle said, "Well, we've done our duty. Let's get brunch in that new cafŽ down the street."

I said "Maybelle, you get brunch. I'm staying here." I stayed with him that night, but he never woke up.

Arsenius died the next day.

His sisters and brothers were at the funeral, and a few kids from his class. The high school secretary came along with Arsenius' English teacher, Miss Anthus. The cute Media World associate came. Ruth Ann, the cashier, came, too. And so did Maybelle. Lavinia wasn't there.

A few days after the funeral, I sold the Chevy to Nancy's son for a hundred dollars. I didn't care; I just wanted it out of the garage. Then, I donated the computer and digital camera to the high school.

Maybelle called a few days later and asked me if I'd like to walk to the library with her. I told her maybe next week. I told her I was feeling pretty old and useless that day.

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