

Norbin Greeley

Listen. We're in a world of cats. Some of them live downtown and spend their hours at bars where the smoke wraps around you like the crispness of a Victrola machine. Other cats live by 42nd street, and wake up every morning with the roosters to yell at insurance statements and stocks. Our hero wasn't either of these species. Rather, Norbin Greeley was the kind of cat who enjoyed the crust of a week-old pizza and the lives of those who poured from his television.

This isn't a story about swing or jazz. It's not about imagination, or what's hip, or even billboards with babies who tell you how much they love you. This is a story about what it means to be a person, and perhaps a story about stories. That's about it.

With the clap of a 3-dollar window shutter, we meet our main character. The television plays a rerun from the 50s, and the sound of the laugh track is matched only by the crunch of potato chips from the other side of the room. It's a hell of a name, Norbin Greeley. A hero of the neighborhood, he's got more legends told about him than any other character from North 40th Avenue all the way to The District. The stories match a man with glasses whose frames obscure the entirety of his forehead and whose belt has pictures of halibut on it. That's our guy. His recent days focus on Cheetos, an inability to brush his teeth before noon, and subtle itches to the his crotch area.

Norbin's about to see an angel, but he doesn't know it yet.

It's a Wednesday evening. The asphalt on the street is covered by layers of smog, grease, and rain. Norbin has sunk three inches into his couch and is posed to sink another by the end of the hour. His face droops from his skull, limp eyebrows hanging over his glazed eyeballs. Most of the neighborhood's mythology of Norbin centers around him in this prophetic stance. The earth speeds on its course, and Norbin sinks another quarter of an inch, to the disappointment of his couch.

A knock on the door. Norbin doesn't react, lost perhaps in thought. The knock repeats. Norbin turns his head in a dawn of slow recognition, and sags on his path to the front of his apartment. He opens the door, and in bursts an angel, in a state of delirium.

"There isn't much time!" He cries, "The world's about to end. We need to get out of here."

Norbin crunches a potato chip.

"Did you hear the news about the Soviet disarmament treaty? The pact didn't work. We have to go."

Now, we may never know why our hero does what he does. Perhaps he thought of when he was a child and he had asked his mother for Blue Bell ice cream, and she had told him about the dangers of talking to strangers. Perhaps he had smelled tar behind him - the crisps of the city's tires that combusted from the heat of atoms bursting furiously away from each other. Perhaps, instead, he looked at his gut and was sickened by the creases in his shirt at his bloated navel. But just as the bomb's fingers unlatched his windows, Norbin reached his own fingers to the angel's outstretched palm. And, a micro-distance before their connection, the bomb split open the window, reached into Norbin's ear, flowed down to his stomach, and ate him inside out.

So listen. Norbin didn't have a good break. But this isn't England, and our lives don't unroll from a film canister. And maybe it's a mistake that the angel had knocked on the door of our hero, who paused in thought, instead of anybody else's. Maybe it's a better story if the angel was

a lover and Norbin was a writer and the bomb was the time that passed and rotted our heroes out before one could say to the other, 'Thank you for taking out the recycling.' Or maybe it was a father and son who wanted to play ball but the fingers of winter crept in and got the boy sick, and his father doesn't know, and now the angel's a balding man with a catcher's mitt in one hand, wearing a hat he was going to give to his son as a rite of passage.

Or maybe it's all of these things. Or maybe it's none. All I know is that the world is full of cats, and cats don't like to tell just one part of a story. Maybe that's why listening to them is so thrilling, even if just on a Tuesday afternoon when the world shakes off meanings like an old Victrola machine.