Grady

He played a sweet, rich flute, pure tones chasing an endless melody conjuring lush fields, peace and tranquility. But he played them on refrigerator-size speakers.

His condo was below ours. The day he moved in, I knocked on his door to ask him to dial down the volume. He didn´t look like a blissed-out new-ager. He was a big black guy with one eye that didn´t quite look at you the right way. His face was scrunched, almost surly, and he wore a default frown. He didn´t look tranquil.

The door barely opened. There was no pledge of accommodation and the barest nod at being neighbors.

The volume changed minutely. My partner and I were not keyed to confrontation. Not yet. She bought the condo with a dodgy down payment cadged from her young retirement account. It was the first property she owned, purchased at age 45.

It was a sweet place with retirees, people working for government and others in the wine business. Santa Rosa is about fifty miles north of San Francisco and 30 from Napa. Suburban security, the site of Hitchcock´s 1942 Shadow of a Doubt, written by Thornton Wilder --domestic safety punctured by killer Joseph Cotton´s malign presence.

We lived close together, ten one-bedroom units in two-story buildings, in our case only 12 feet from the next building. Our building had a pool and a hot tub we often had to ourselves. There was a guy in a wheelchair a building away living on Disability payments, who took lots of drugs and liked to have homeless people, hookers, ex-cons and assorted losers around to get high with. We got used to flashing lights at night, but nobody seemed to get too hurt.

Sherry´s black boyfriend, just kitty-corner below us, yelled into his cellphone Sunday mornings for little apparent reason, but he wasn´t there all the time. She was a biggish middle-aged blonde with a warm heart and complicated life. We liked her. He was just pointlessly loud just below our bedroom.

But we could not ignore the new and almost constant loud music from below. It was right there all the time. I went down again and then again, each time a little angrier but still polite. I always got the bad stink-eye along with enhanced performances of bad-ass black guy. He couldn´t quite bring it off. He was a bit too old, and his sweet music betrayed him, but the danger of derangement only seemed to grow.

My partner was no pushover. She had lived in among the poor dopers and dropouts in small shacks along the Russian River, ten miles out of town. She and one other woman were the only ones who drove to a job every morning. Yet she didn´t handle the disruption of her hard-won home without rage. Once she banged a mop handle on the floor for 15 minutes trying to bring the noise down. It didn´t work.

I was a veteran of a bad neighbor row in New Mexico that escalated into a street fight, death threats, a loaded gun and six months of sleeping with one eye open. No one wanted that.

We called the cops a few times. Grady must have been fairly polite to them. They came up to us cautioning patience and tolerance.

Of course, that didn´t work. Once my partner’s 17-year-old daughter went down to have the volume lowered and delivered a homily on courtesy. Again, not much change.

The thing was that Grady wasn´t really a bad guy. He just had something wrong. Being big and black had worked for him in the past, but so did the aura of his lush music. He had a great line about Santa Rosa. “A sophisticated cow town.” It wasn´t far from wrong. It had once been deemed the Happiest Town in America by a pollster/demographer algorithm. A big lie.

The music was just so good, graceful, pure, clean and oh so calm. I never figured out where it came from. I didn´t think he knew either.

He had a friend, a pretty black woman, that we met. They were friends, not lovers. They shared Detroit riot. In the summer of 1967 the city erupted after a raid on a black after-hours club. Six days later 43 were dead, almost twelve hundred injured, 7,000 arrested and 400 buildings destroyed. It was the worst civic violence since the Civil War. They swapped stories about hiding out scared and watching the chaos. The 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions were called in.

So they saw some shit, but had carved out decent, even good lives for themselves in the happiest town in America. It never looked like that in Grady´s face, however; even Diane couldn´t avoid seeing it.

There were various truces in the sound war. One day Grady dropped off a CD of some of his most ethereal music. He had several. We listened to it often…at low volume. He was Kenny G but even more heartfelt. I took it to a relaxation yoga group I went to. I don´t think I was sentenced to it or merely advised to go. It wasn´t the kind of thing I would normally do without some prodding. I left the CD there by accident. The kind woman who ran the sessions thanked me profusely.

Grady couldn´t maintain his tranquility, nor I mine. One day after weeks of tiptoeing around in the name of peace, I lost it a little and went for him as he got into his car. I am pulling on the door handle and looking for a fight to settle things permanently. He wasn´t having it and drove off.

Later he came down to the garage where I was working and told me his story. He was a Vietnam vet, he said, an infantryman. He walked point on patrol, the first guy in line who was supposed to see booby traps on the trail and avoid them. A hand grenade slid into a juice can with the pin already pulled and a trip line attached, was the arrangement shown in training. The point man’s leg pulls the live grenade out of the can. It is man two or three who gets it.

Grady didn´t see one once, he said, and was forever guilty. The second guy was older. “He had kids,” he said. The story was familiar. I bought it. It seemed to explain a lot, maybe even the peaceful music.

Although the noise never went completely away, we were all better. Grady got another car, a nice not-too-old SUV. We never knew exactly what he did for money. He played lunches some days at a new-age café. Maybe got some kind of disability payment.

He was around less and less and then not at all. One day Diane was there, and I asked her where Grady had been. She said he was in jail for car theft or receiving stolen goods or something else and would not be out for months, maybe even a year. The place would likely be sold.

I was a little sad. He always looked like the bad man, cultivated it even, but I didn´t think he really was.

Sometime later my partner came across information about him quite accidentally at her work. Yes, he had been in the Army, but he was a cook not a point man. And he had applied for some type of disability.

Now he was just gone. I couldn´t imagine that he would do much time. He was smart in many ways. Though maybe not smart enough to wiggle completely out of a good deal on something someone else had stolen. He came with a lot of parts very differently put together. The clear insight. The nasty veneer. And oh, that great music.