

Neutral Ground

by
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Characters

- Linda Mixed race Latinx female, late 30s. Ivie's childhood friend since kindergarten. Legal aid attorney, mom, wife.
- Ivie Puerto Rican-American Latinx female, late 30s. Grade school teacher, single-mom.

Time

Sunday, May 31, 2020. Nighttime in Chicago. Linda's front porch.

LINDA stands on her well-lighted porch. Two yard signs are visible: "Black Lives Matter" and "Las Vidas Negras Importan." IVIE jogs in, then slows to a walk, carefully looking at the addresses of nearby houses.

LINDA

(Whispering)

Ivie. Ivelisse! Over here.

IVIE

I never remember the number.

LINDA

Did you park by the neutral ground?

IVIE

The what?

LINDA

The grassy median.

IVIE

Why, will I get a ticket?

LINDA

No, that's where you won't get one.

(Notices Ivie has been crying.)

What's wrong? Is it Sammy?

IVIE

(Sitting on the bottom step, removes mask, blows nose.)

No. I haven't heard from that fool in months. Is this OK?

LINDA

(Removes hers too.)

Of course. Sit closer.

(Ivie moves to the highest step and sits. Linda moves to a chair near the door, inching away and stopping exactly at the 6-foot mark in her mind. She sits.)

IVIE

It's everything. The riots. I've been crying so much, but hiding it from the kids. I don't want them to see. I told them I'm getting groceries.

LINDA

At 10 at night?

(Ivie cries.)

I know, it's awful. Did something specific upset you?

IVIE

No. Yes?

LINDA

What is it?

IVIE

You think it's awful? I didn't think you did.

LINDA

Of course I do. Where's this coming from?

IVIE

I came here because I respect you and your perspective, your understanding. It's important. But I don't understand what you think.

LINDA

What do you think I think?

IVIE

I don't understand why people mess up their own neighborhoods.
Destroy stores on their own block—where they gonna buy food?
And why now?
I know it's terrible, I watched that video, I watch all the videos. It makes me
physically sick, I get dizzy, racist cops make me fucking sick.
But why now? COVID? Because people need things?

LINDA

I think you know, what I think. You know what I do, my activism, you even
like my Tweets.
And it sounds like you know why shit's is a mess.

IVIE

I don't.
I read all the posts, all the quotes, "rioting is the language of the unheard,"
but I don't understand why you would want to destroy your own home, what
the fuck!

LINDA

I didn't Tweet that. You read that somewhere else. There's so much more
than Wikipedia quotes and rehashed—

IVIE

I did read it somewhere else, the whole speech. Nowhere does MLK say
violence is OK—

LINDA

I didn't say it was. I don't think that's—really the issue.
Violence is happening. It's here.
But. I think about what it takes to get there. Why it's happening is
important.
What would it take for me to get there.

What I'm capable of, what other people are capable of—

IVIE

I teach my kids to follow the rules.

LINDA

What rules do you want them to follow?

IVIE

Why should we go looking for trouble?
This ain't changing racist minds, Lin.

LINDA

I don't care to change them, Ivie. I'm saving my energy for realistic shit.

IVIE

Like, I don't think the PR community would do that.
I know there's knuckleheads. But not the community.

LINDA

The Division Street riots in '66?

(Ivie shrugs.)

At Damen and Division, between the two big flags.
A White cop shot a young Puerto Rican guy in the leg.
Three days of rioting. Dude didn't even die!
We would do that.

IVIE

And what did that get us. I never even heard of it.

LINDA

If you ask my dad, he remembers a weekend when he and his buddies threw rocks and watched fights.
But the community had a shitty relationship to the cops. High unemployment, poverty. Then there were marches and rallies and hearings

and policy proposals, and community groups formed.
Albizu Campos High School came from that, right?
We've made some progress.
But up and down, back and forth.
We should all be out there.

I don't think I can say anymore than that, Ivie.

IVIE

I wouldn't credit the riots for all of that.
And Campos is half-empty anyway. There's not enough community left.

LINDA

I don't think I—

IVIE

Whose we?

LINDA

Puerto Ricans.

IVIE

You said in high school you're bi-racial.

LINDA

I am.

And that was in response to you telling me I wasn't Latina enough, or
Hispanic, I don't remember which. One time you said I wanted to be White.
More than one time.

IVIE

That was fucked up. I know.

(Starting to cry.)

I was a stupid kid, I didn't know any better,
You still remember all of that?

LINDA

Not because of you. That might've been the first time, or close to it, but it wasn't the last. It's not always direct. Little things, like, not in my face, but. They don't see me, they don't care to, they don't care what I think, or who I am. Dismissive.
Sometimes it's like, a slow-release pill, and I realize hours later.
Death by a thousand cuts.
Please stop crying.

IVIE

I am sorry.

LINDA

Thank you.

(Ivie gets up and wipes her eyes.)

Do you need me to walk you to the car? You don't have to leave yet.

IVIE

Who'll walk you back, loca?

(Sits.)

Why did you call it the neutral ground?

LINDA

That's what they call it New Orleans.

I think it was the area between the U.S. and French, or the Spanish? It was a boundary that didn't really belong to anyone.

So it was "free." It kept the peace.

Now it's the best spot where we can watch a Mardi Gras parade.

IVIE

Where do you get this stuff.

What news do you watch?

LINDA

Any, all. You?

IVIE

I don't. What should I watch? I don't have cable, I don't want it.

LINDA

How do you get information?

IVIE

Online, radio, Carlos.

LINDA

Your brother's your Republican news source.

IVIE

An independent.

(Chuckles.)

He's a union guy, Lin.

LINDA

Just like every old-school Chicago Democrat.

(Laughing.)

He's a "get off my property, look at my guns" Latinotype.

IVIE

(Hurt.)

He's a, I earned it so you should earn it too, Latinotype.

LINDA

Look, I know he's a good guy, he helps you.

IVIE

He's so good with the kids. He's there, more than their father ever was.

LINDA

But you don't owe him your beliefs.

(Silence.)

PBS is good. It's free. It's neutral.

IVIE

How 'bout your dad.

LINDA

We are not talking. Not about this stuff.

IVIE

That's crazy. He has to have strong feelings about all this.
You don't care what he thinks, what he knows—

LINDA

You think I want to know that?

I don't want to know what a CPD detective who worked when Burge was
frying the testicles of innocent Black men, knows or what he saw, or if he had
anything to do with that!

IVIE

"Truth and Reconciliation."

(Chuckles.)

That's a hashtag you use, right?

LINDA

You're making fun of me.

IVIE

No, I'm calling you out. Talk to your papí. You need to understand the other
side too.

LINDA

See, that's why you're confused. You think there are equal sides to this shit. "False equivalency" is another one of my go-to hashtags, look it up.

IVIE

So there's just one side? You always talk about class. Your father's working class, but he's a cop, so he doesn't count?

LINDA

He chose to be a cop.
He told me before that when he'd investigate and interview people, they were expecting an Italian because of our last name. But he'd show up with his dark skin, and they'd ask, where's Serrano?
Old White folks'd call him the N- word.
How could he stay.
I don't want to ask him.
I don't want to hurt him anymore.
I don't want him to hurt me.
I called him two days ago and he didn't even want to talk about the weather.
It takes two to reconcile.

IVIE

I talked to Carlos last night. We argued about this shit, and I told him to fuck off. Oops.

I'm scared he won't talk to me for a while.
But I can't, sometimes. He gets to me.

LINDA

You know your limits.
You're a better woman than me.

He's gonna talk to you.

IVIE

Maybe not.

(Puts on her mask.)

Groceries. So they don't think I was lying.
You good?

LINDA

Not yet.
Cuidate.

(They touch hands.)

IVIE
(Leaving.)

Nos vemos.