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THE GIRL NEXT DOOR

THE PHONE RANG. MARINA WAS SURE it would be one of her clients phoning to cancel. Breathe, she told herself, feeling the cleansing breath she'd spent years perfecting catch midway in her chest and ricochet back into her throat. The phone sat on the ledge of her living-room window, the venetian blinds tightly drawn. Letting it ring a second time, she prepared herself for what the client—no doubt that V.P. at the pharmaceutical company—would say. “How are you?” the V.P. would begin, her tone all sugary with curiosity. Then, after the requisite small talk, she would just come out with it. “Was that *you* I saw on the news last night? Do you *live* there?”

Instead, it was the secretary from Grace's school saying that Grace wanted to speak with her.

“Grace! Are you all right, honey?”

“I'm okay, but my stomach hurts.”

“It does, honey? Does it hurt a little bit or a whole bunch?”

This reversion to baby talk with her ten-year-old daughter was a compensatory habit Marina had fallen into lately. According to the teacher, several of her classmates had called home lately, complaining of stomach pains and headaches—the usual bodily response to a traumatic event that was too much to assimilate—but this was the first time for Grace. She almost seemed to be coping too well.

“I don't know ... it doesn't hurt too bad, I guess—”

“Do you want me to come and pick you up now?”

Another jagged breath nicked Marina's chest wall as a siren screeched on the street below. “Grace? Are you still there? Do you want me to pick you up now?”

“Um ... I don't know, because the teacher said this afternoon we're going over stuff for our test.”

“So, do you think you feel well enough to stay, or do you want me to come and get you?”

Another long pause. Grace's usual indecision had intensified lately. Marina edged closer to the shaded window, wondering how many reporters were out there, cozying up to the locals. Letting the whole world know about her neighbourhood. "Shabby Victorian row houses divided into rentals on a street full of colourful characters," was how one newspaper put it, her unit prominently displayed in the accompanying photo.

"Maybe after school would be better."

"OK then. I'll see you at a quarter to four, sweetie. I'll pick you up right outside your classroom. *Love* you."

She hung up, her skin prickling from the stuffy heat in her darkened apartment. Bright June sunlight pressed against the slats of her blinds, as if any second now it might crash through like surf. You've got to get out of here, she thought. Go to Dufferin Mall, maybe pick up some Tums for Grace. Halfway down the hall to get her keys, she remembered she couldn't leave or enter her house without enduring more police questioning. They had been courteous enough at first. But now with more evidence being uncovered, they'd started treating everyone on the block as if they were accomplices in their collective, utter oblivion about what had occurred in front of their eyes in broad daylight.

Why was *this* happening just when things were finally coming together for her? Divorce almost dealt with; goals set. Trust that the universe, her unreliable friend, would finally help her expand into the fullest potential of what she was meant to be. No clients had cancelled yet. Which meant that there was still a good chance that she would be holding a weekend retreat called "Accessing Intuition Through Yoga" for twenty-four women executives at the Muskoka Sands Inn, the most exclusive location she ever booked for an event.

Another sound made her neck jerk upright. The whispered scraping of some steely tool. Tweezers clicking on a hard surface—a kitchen floor—or a countertop maybe. Could it be the investigators picking up a trace of something?

No. She couldn't possibly hear anything happening in *that* apartment. Several walls, thick, well-built brick walls separated them.

She stared at her course notes sprawled out on her coffee table, spouting what now seemed absurdities about the inviolable power of a woman's intuition. What was worse? Being trapped here? Or undergoing another interrogation by that arrogant cop stationed at her front door?

What's your name?

Do you own or rent your home?

How long have you been living at this address?

Too long.

When she first saw the police helicopter, weeks ago, so high in the sky, scanning the ten-block area of investigation like some prehistoric bird, she felt odd bursts of comfort under her terror. Whoever did that to the little girl—the person or persons still out there—must know that they were being watched, even though realistically, the helicopter had no way of spotting them, from so far above the real world. With the crime also came the news—repeated in every newspaper article and TV and radio broadcast—that the greatest percentage of the city's sex offenders were concentrated in her area.

No surprise there. She wanted to move to a better area. She knew from her criminology courses that a sex offender, once his crime became known, was likely to strike again before getting caught. During the unbearable month the killer remained loose, the police made a desperate appeal to area residents, urging them to search their memories for small clues about anything that might have been out of the ordinary that day, anyone who looked suspicious.

Was it you, she'd wonder about a stocky, balding, too genial-looking guy, strolling down Dundas Street, with his head thrust back as if determined to whistle a happy tune. Or you, she'd wonder at the tatty-haired, lost soul who regularly paced the steps of the local mall, wearing the same Toronto Maple Leafs hockey shirt day-in, day-out. Years of yoga training had given her a heightened sensitivity to the body's messages. She scanned people's backs, the set of their shoulders, their hands, for any signs of the monstrous finesse that could butcher a young girl's body into eight pieces, as with a pleading hope that her intuition would announce the killer's identity with a resounding "*There!*"

And then, there it was. Driving Grace home from school one afternoon, she saw, hovering over her home, the familiar police helicopter, suspended in a foreboding stillness, no longer searching.

He had done it mercifully fast, in his apartment two doors down from hers. Not the predictable sex offender type after all, but a computer analyst without a criminal record, who worked for the government. She was not lying—to the police, her friends, her family, or more importantly, even to herself, when she said that she had never seen the guy. God knows, if she

had seen him, a nondescript, preppy man swinging a briefcase, she would have thought that his very middle-class innocuousness added respectability to the neighbourhood.

The phone rang, making her jump. The secretary at Grace's school again; apparently she had changed her mind and wanted Marina to come and take her home.

"OK, honey. I'll come and get you."

The first thing she saw when opening her front door to the glare of sunlight was the police barricade. Not the usual flimsy yellow tape they used on cop shows, but one made of permanent-looking metal: a waist-high fence sealing off the sidewalk in front of her house from one block to the other. Pausing just outside her front door, she took in the crowd. Twice as many people as this morning, bonded by an inflated and fleeting camaraderie that a brutal crime provides. Arnie, the sleazy owner of the local video store, all spruced up in a suit jacket, chatting up a TV cameraman: her main floor tenant Nadine—already three sheets to the wind by the looks of it—rubbing elbows with the forlorn looking guy in the Toronto Maple Leafs hockey shirt. Everywhere the police directed traffic; the stream of drivers slowing down to gawk, the pedestrians being herded to the other side of the street. And presiding over his domain on the segregated stretch of sidewalk, the same cocky policeman she had dealt with earlier this morning.

He was mammoth and blonde, his shoulders a smug wall of authority. Hundreds of eyes fastened on her as she walked down the porch steps trying to project an aura of professionalism. An educated woman. The only person in her Portuguese family to have graduated from university (with honours yet, while coping with a baby and a collapsing marriage!). Someone who still hoped to get her masters in clinical psychology one day.

"Name?" the policeman asked.

Her lips hitched up in a tight, beatific smile. The guy had been caught.

Why were they still interrogating her? Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Nadine waving at her, and pretended not to see.

"Officer, you know who I am. We went through this earlier this morning when I took my daughter to school. Remember?"

He indicated a spot to the side of her porch, almost directly in front of a cameraman perched on the other side of the barricade. "Could you step over there, please? And could I see two pieces of ID?"

She fumbled through her wallet, knowing he was grandstanding for the pretty young reporter who had tried to interview her the other day, and who now inched toward them, motioning to her cameraman.

“I’m Marina Marquez. I own this place. I have to pick up my daughter from school. She’s really sick.”

The policeman scrutinized her driver’s license with the same show of officious intensity he had used earlier that morning, dragging it out so that the reporter could get the camera in position. Marina ducked, noticing for the first time how her porch sloped up at the side almost in a caricature of lower-class shabbiness.

“Look, I have to pick up my daughter,” she said, advancing a step. A mistake, for the policeman physically blocked her with his chest. This is what will be on the news tonight, she thought, her nose almost pressed to his sternum. This is what your clients will see. You, among the colorful riffraff of your street, being treated like some slumlord.

A dream is a goal with a plan and a deadline. A quote she had inscribed on a post-it note last spring, and stuck on her bathroom mirror. Putting her place up for sale this month was her top priority. She and Grace had drawn up a list of what they wanted most.

No tenants, just us, was Grace’s biggest wish. A huge financial adjustment to be made there, for Marina’s main floor and basement tenants covered the bulk of her mortgage. Her father had bought the unit for her for practically nothing when she had returned from her year of studying yoga in India, pregnant, with her new husband Stefan in tow. Accustomed to the poverty of Asia, the shabbiness of the neighbourhood barely registered at first. When she got her graduate degree, when Stefan, brilliant but directionless, figured out what he wanted to do with his life, they would think about moving.

Though the city’s real estate market had soared, her area had stayed flagrantly flat. She had been waiting for it to evolve from an “area in transition” to at least decently lower middle class. And now, this happening.

Howard, her basement tenant, emerged from his apartment into the sunlight like a stooped blinking mole, diverting the policeman’s attention away from her, so she could get to her car. The forensic team was still combing the back alley where she usually parked, so the city had given her a parking permit for a side street two blocks away. Head down, she ploughed past the

crowd toward her ancient, beat-up Volvo. Once in the car, she turned onto Lansdowne, the street where the girl had last been seen.

Lush, mature oaks lined the street, but Marina saw them as ominous now, knowing that their beauty that spring had lulled a young girl into a false sense of safety, particularly after one of the coldest winters in a decade. Hadn't Marina—(who yes, in answer to *that* question, *was* home that day)—felt optimistic with the warmer weather too? Almost unreasonably so, with her goals set, a new sense of purpose? In the long-awaited sunshine of that May day, it would have been easy for a responsible ten-year-old to convince her mother to let her walk five minutes to a friend's place by herself. Hadn't Grace been begging to go out alone ever since she turned ten?

Every parent grappled with this issue, but Marina hated refusing Grace opportunities to develop her independence—especially since Grace had the maturity that children of struggling mothers often develop, rarely asking Marina for anything more than she could give.

She had finally relented this spring, allowing Grace to cross the street to the corner store by herself, but only if Marina watched her the entire time. A secret pleasure anyway, for Grace was growing into a beauty, the kind of girl people described as “wholesome,” “refined,” and “girl next door.” From her vantage point at the living-room window, she would watch Grace run, pumping the long legs she had inherited from her father's Swiss side of the family, with her straight, honey-blonde hair flying behind her. The store was a black hole of sell-everything junk heap. Into its gloom Grace would vanish, and after a few interminable minutes would emerge, look both ways, and dash across the street with as much comic dignity as her new, truncated independence allowed. Now, nearing Grace's school, Marina had a sickening thought that she immediately suppressed: did *he* ever stand at his living room window, with the same second-floor vantage point, and watch too?

The visitor's parking lot behind the school lay empty. She parked, relieved that Grace had asked to be picked up early, thereby avoiding any encounter with other parents. A week ago, she had felt a camaraderie with them; terrified parents staunching their feelings to put up a charade of normalcy for the sake of their children. But now, with everyone knowing about her proximity to the event ...

She expected to find Grace waiting in the office, but it was empty save for the school secretary, Lydia. She immediately looked up from her desk.

“Marina! How are you?”

“Gooooood. Is Grace here?”

“She’ll be down in a minute,” Lydia said brightly. Then, “Are the investigators still at your place?”

“They are.”

“Have they found anything yet?”

How the fuck should I know? Marina wanted to say. Do you think I actually go to that apartment, knock on the door, and ask the forensic group what they’ve come up with? A bone shard? A strand of hair?

“I don’t know. I’ve been so busy with work lately. I’m leading a retreat at Muskoka in two weeks.” This barely registered with Lydia, who simply nodded as if Marina were a child making things up. “And I don’t want to know. I’m not watching the news anymore, reading anything about it ...”

Lydia shook her head and shuddered. “I don’t blame you. If I lived next door to *him* ...”

“We don’t live next door! We live two doors down!”

Just then, Grace walked in, looking smaller than she had this morning, dwarfed by her pink Barbie backpack, slipping off one shoulder. Conscious of the cameras, Marina had insisted—without an argument from Grace—that she dress in her good clothes today: an embroidered denim skirt and fitted Gap T-shirt. But the hem of her skirt slanted crookedly above one knee, giving her a neglected, ragamuffin look.

“All set?”

Grace nodded an indeterminate yes or no, not looking at her. Ordinarily, Marina would have enclosed her in a big hug, but the constant scrutiny had made them self-conscious around each other in public, and they stood apart in stilted silence while Grace was signed out.

The sunlight was sharper now, delineating the dents in her Volvo. A month ago, her major concern was how she was going to pull up in front of the Muskoka Sands Inn in this piece of junk without any of her clients spotting her. Yoga teachers weren’t supposed to be wealthy, but she didn’t want her clients—especially this well-heeled group—to know how financially precarious her life was, how she occasionally worked as a blackjack dealer at her brother’s casino in Hamilton to make ends meet. Now the car provided the sealed-off sanctuary that she was grateful for.

Grace sunk into the passenger seat, and propped her feet up on her backpack.

“What kind of homework do you have?”

“Just geography.”

“Oh, that shouldn’t be so bad.” Grace’s teacher was big on colouring maps, which Marina loved helping her with. Look, she’d say, pointing to the countries in central and southeast Asia. I’ve been there, I’ve been there, and I swam in the Indian Ocean. With sharks once!

“Weren’t you scared?” Grace had asked.

“A little,” Maria had replied.

“What are you most afraid of now?”

She now ran her fingers through Grace’s hair, a compulsive gesture, needing to touch her to convince herself that she was still there. “I thought it might be fun to get a video.”

“Okay.” Her brow furrowed as Marina turned onto an unfamiliar street. “Aren’t we going to Arnie’s video store?”

Not since he gave that interview to the paper, the very last article Marina had read on the subject. Swollen with his temporary stardom, he had rhapsodized about the accused’s surprisingly eclectic taste in movies; predictably, *The John Gacy Story*, but also the unexpected *Josie and the Pussycats*, which he had apparently rented before Marina. Even thinking that she had touched something he had touched, maybe picked up one of his skin cells ...

“I thought we could go to Blockbuster. They have a better selection. Does that sound all right to you?”

“Okay.”

“Do you want to listen to Hillary Duff?”

“Okay.”

Marina rummaged about in the back seat, sending a tower of tranquility tapes clattering against a pile of her latest promotional brochure. Her style of yoga—which she laboured over to explain without sounding flaky—accessed the deep feminine wisdom of the body. Wisdom beyond mere mind, as she planned to say at the workshop. Wisdom that was pure instinct and accessible through breath.

Sliding in the CD, she thought of the other parents in the city who were breathing a collective sigh of relief that the guy had been caught. A release of breath too powerful to be taught in a yoga class, one starting deep in the pelvis and drawing upwards, releasing all the terror stoked since reading the headline, “Have you seen this girl?” A breath that would end in an explosion of giddy laughter if you didn’t think of the girl’s parents.

Grace crooned along with Hilary, her voice in tune with the lower notes. She looked peaked, but she was sleeping well. Unnaturally well,

probably, but that was a function of her dissociation. What would Marina do when Grace woke up from the inevitable nightmare of a butcher knife slashing through her bedroom wall?

Once, when Grace was four, she had awakened crying in the middle of the night. “Why do there have to be bad people in the world?” Stefan had surprised Marina by rousing himself out of his burgeoning apathy to sit up with Grace and comfort her. How would he counsel her now, she wondered, as she turned onto one of the nicer streets along High Park. The geographically absent father, remarried and living in Brussels, apparently content to see his beautiful daughter once a year.

The houses on this street had an empty look, no cars in the driveways, no pedestrians. The quiet seemed to congeal in every verandah, amplifying their space, making them great basins of privacy.

“Oh look! There’s a house for us!” Grace cried.

It took Marina a moment to realize she was pointing to a small bungalow on the corner with a “For Sale” sign in front. Oh yes, the house-choosing game they had been playing for the past three months. She slowed down and took in the putty colored clapboard and the smart white trim.

“You think the lawn is big enough?” she asked.

“It looks OK.”

“But it doesn’t have a tree out front. Remember? We wanted a tree out front?”

“That’s okay ... I don’t need one.”

She heard the unhappy, suppressed longing in her daughter’s voice.

“Here,” she said, handing Grace one of her brochures from the back seat. “Write down the real estate agent’s number on this and we’ll look at it on the weekend.”

When they entered the Blockbuster on Keele, Marina’s breath almost stopped. The John Gacy videos—with a vile close-up of his face—were lined up on the front shelf next to copies of *Josie and the Pussycats*. Was this for real? Had one of the clerks—a guy no doubt, some sad, sick, Quentin Tarantino wannabe—read the newspaper article about the accused’s taste in movies and decided that it would hilarious to replicate it here?

That interview with Arnie, the interview she had read despite her misgivings, swam back to her mind with sickening clarity. How the accused had kept *Josie and the Pussycats* out for two weeks, and good-naturedly paid the late charges. Little girls in that movie. Little girls in tiny tops and

tiny skirts squealing over the big girl band. Barreling towards the clerk—a dull-looking teenage girl behind the counter—she suddenly became aware of a space behind her, a chilling absence.

“Grace? ... Did you see my daughter?”

The clerk shook her head dumbly, just as Marina did when the police showed her the missing girl’s photo.

“Grace! Where are you?”

The florescent lighting was disorienting. *There are no instincts as fine-tuned as that as a predator.* Swinging into the comedy aisle, she set several copies of *Porkys* crashing to the floor, then grabbed the wide-eyed girl clutching a Barbie video.

“Didn’t I tell you to stay with me? Did I tell you *never* to leave my sight?”

Grace’s lower lip trembled. And Marina’s damned-up tears began to flow.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you, Grace.”

“That’s okay.”

“Do you want to go home now?”

“Okay.”

The crowd in front of her place had increased, a vast pilgrimage of spectators that kept coming and coming. Together as a unit, they walked down the segregated stretch of sidewalk, which the blond policeman still commandeered.

“Name?” he asked.

“You know it, officer. Why don’t you tell me?”

His jaw tensed in anger. Why couldn’t she keep her head up? Why was it now like a lead ball, rolling toward her front porch?

Oh, the things she didn’t want to know, the details she wished she had never found out. At five thirty, he had dragged the girl to the alleyway behind Marina’s house, which her kitchen window overlooked. The window she’d probably been standing in front of, slicing red peppers for a salad.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry,” she started mumbling to someone, not the officer, who nonetheless interpreted it as an apology.

“You can go in,” he said, and she felt Grace’s hand on hers, leading her up the steps.

“Accessing Intuition Through Yoga” went surprisingly well—two days of towering clouds and azure water affording a suitably transcendent setting for the women executives who had paid good money for the retreat at the Muskoka Sands Inn. Spiritually stripped, Marina’s body did all the things her mind could not. Smiled. Kept her shoulders straight. Laid her hands on necks and backs, giving the impression that she could feel muscular blocks, when the truth was, there was very little she could feel these days. Yet when the course concluded on Sunday afternoon, everyone clapped with the kind of heartfelt appreciation she had once craved.

Driving home, Marina was aware of the rising and falling of her diaphragm, taking her first deep inhalations in weeks. Just before the toll route, she pulled up beside a small lake and stared at the water.

Insight, she had told her class, is literally that, a sight within, seeing into another mindset as if you had a window on another world. Gazing at the water, a particular window appeared—*his* window. She saw that during those spring days when she allowed Grace her abbreviated sprints across the street that he was watching too from his own apartment two doors down. With that near-mystical insight that only women possess, Marina understood that Grace had been his first choice. Wholesome. Refined. Within reach. But—and he had *known* this—protected. They had stood at their windows, almost side by side, murderer and mother, the two of them bound by the spell of pure, shared love, unable to take their eyes off Grace as she took her first mad dash to the woman she would someday be.