

THE FIRE NEXT DOOR

Betsy Carter's screen door slaps shut. It almost catches her backside as she pushes through it and steps onto the patio carrying a tray filled with pink glasses and a swirly-glass pitcher. In Betsy's backyard, summer-time props are lined up at attention -- citronella lanterns, a drink tub filled with ice and soda, extra wood stacked by their new fire pit. Laura Tucker sees this all from her bedroom window next door, looking down, helpless to salvage a beautiful summer evening. If it weren't for the smoke, and the party noise that was soon to crescendo from the Carter's backyard, Laura would have turned off her air conditioning and opened the window. Let in the lovely breeze, grateful for the opportunity to chase away the summer-stale air that has collected inside.

Instead she turns from the window and looks at her hands, fingers spread of their own volition. She is staring at them unseeing, trying hard to remember why she came upstairs in the first place. Things are seeping from her, her short-term memory and attention to detail. If she could just pull her fingers together, perhaps her thoughts would follow. It's funny, she clearly can recall the details of a trip she and Mark took long ago, before the kids were born, before, even, they moved into this house. They had traveled to Alaska, to a hotel so remote that guests had to leave their cars behind where the dirt road ended at a swift moving river. In an old chairlift seat, pairs took turns pulling themselves over the water, hand over hand, on the cable above. She and Mark were the last to go. It was so easy to glide the chair to the middle of the cable, but they had struggled hard on the upswing and the other guests, in their excitement to get to the place they all were headed, failed to turn around and see that Mark and Laura could use some help. Now, left to dangle, she can't even get to rely on Mark's stronger arms.

She looks back out the window. The Carters have set up a croquet set tonight. Honestly. Who plays croquet? She is not unaware that the Carters have become her private obsession. Not unlike the distraction of reality TV, she is observing some one else's mess, ignoring what might be termed her own. Ostensibly she could be washing dishes, but just as often she is stuck standing in front of an entirely empty sink, wasted water running, because no one is home who needs tending to. Because it's Mark's weekend with the kids. In this way, she had watched as the Carter's fire pit project unfolded over the course of the spring like a bad recipe for family togetherness. There were weeks worth of Betsy's saccharine entreaties to get everyone to pitch in.

"It will be so much fun when the fire pit is finished. S'mores any night of the week."

Then, in one weekend afternoon, Betsy's husband Jack made short work of it. He dug a hole in the ground and surrounded it with a short wall of bricks. Soon after, the fanned wooden chairs arrived, each one a different bright color, as if to insist that any time spent around the fire pit would be fun, fun, fun.

Tonight the gathering is small. Betsy's parents have joined them but have barely spoken a word, even to each other. They are seated at the patio table but appear only to have moved arms, at the elbows, to bring tall sweating glasses to lips. Something strong Laura suspects -- she has shared strong cocktails with Betsy's parents in summers past. Betsy hovers on the patio, and Laura finds herself pulling up her bedroom window -- just an inch -- and the air-conditioned hush of her bedroom is replaced by Betsy's voice, sweet, piercing.

"Mom, Dad, you've got to try these. It's a new recipe."

Betsy thrusts her kitschy swimming pool shaped serving tray in her parents' direction, and her mother puts up her hand as if to protect herself. So Betsy turns to Owen, her oldest

child, college age now. But he turns his face away, looks up into the trees, where, following his gaze, Laura notices that the fire flies have begun their lovely evening light show.

Enough. She shuts the window. She heads downstairs and pulls an opened bottle of white wine from the refrigerator. Pours herself a large glass, grabs a section of the Sunday paper she's been trying to work her way through all week, and finds a spot in the family room. She picks a long article and slips into the cocooning embrace of the couch. August will end soon enough, and she will be back to car pools and home work supervision, and, on alternating weekends, nights that will be cold and dark. She brings her wine glass to her lips.

There is a sudden, loud sound. The screech of car tires, so unexpected on their quiet street that Laura drops her glass. Her first thought is how best to blot the spill from the expensive carpet, but she stops herself and walks quickly to the front of the house and opens the living room blinds. A car, presumably the one that made the awful sound, is parked in front of the Carter's house. Someone has already jumped out, a young man, Owen's age, maybe older. He is yelling something she cannot hear through her double pane windows. Still, she can tell that mean and ugly words are being hurled like grenades at the Carter's house.

She pulls the blind's cord, instinctively wanting to distance herself from such raw anger. She hated how aggressive Mark could be driving, jamming in and out of lanes, cutting off other cars and disparaging their drivers, the features of his face turned into scowl. It makes her fear for kind and pleasing things. Then she hears the peel of the tires as the car pulls away. She waits, blinds still shut, for something to happen. There should be follow up activity, police cruiser lights and sirens, neighbors rushing over anxious about what happened and is everyone okay. But nothing happens and Laura knows she is in not in a position to do the follow up, not these days.

She waits all the next day for an explanation. Maybe even an apology. Life next door, however, seems to return to normal. When the kitchen door periodically opens, Laura can hear Betsy. Her voice. The way she coos and swirls it, as if whipping cake frosting into fluffy peaks. Does she actually believe that if she is cheerful enough, her children will never be touched by life's bared teeth?

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She and Betsy had been close. There was a time, near the beginning, when the two families were more than just neighbors with the same model of house and matching side doors that opened onto one shared driveway. Her two children were young then, both under four, and life seemed to spill through the side doors and onto the driveway. Laura had been grateful for that. Once she was outside, shifting weather or a simple wave from a neighbor out for exercise, could keep at bay the isolation that would overtake her, that surely would overtake any mother at home with young children, if she did not fling open her house each morning, and cast herself onto the world.

Owen, Betsy's oldest, was nearly eleven when Laura and her family moved in. Owen's sister was nine, their younger brother six. Owen and his sister could ride skateboards and two-wheel bikes, so her children stared, saucer-size eyes filled with adoration. Perhaps that brought the Carter kids out more often. Chicken or egg? But the Carter kids seemed to fall in love with hers, even though they were hapless bundles of energy determined to get in the way. Laura spent hours on the periphery, with something to read, trying to be both hands off and available. She was traffic cop and "boo boo" kisser, and she watched the Carter kids frequently, as requested.

“Mrs. Tucker look at me, no hands....” There was always some modest but new skill to be admired. The younger Carters liked so much to be watched that they usually forgot half-way through what they meant to show her, not that it mattered, so long as she turned vaguely in their direction. Owen was different. His tricks were more difficult and he asked her to look only after he had practiced and practiced. His skateboard required real skill not to fall off and break something. Owen would screw up his face in concentration, make sure she was really looking, and then work hard to finish his turn. He did not always succeed but Laura cheered regardless, glad that an ER trip had been averted. Owen, though, had his own strict criteria, and his face would blaze with disappointment. She wondered how he made it through a school day. Of course, there were the times when Owen had nailed it: the skateboard took flight and, as if with magic glue, stayed attached to his feet, and he landed still balanced on his board. His look was lovely then. As if he believed God had witnessed his accomplishment.

Betsy rarely came out. She did editing work from home and, Laura guessed, took advantage of the quiet inside her house. Eventually, Betsy must have noticed the kind, consistent attention Laura gave to Betsy’s children. Or perhaps she noticed how often Laura was alone with her own kids when Mark had to work late or travel. She began to ask Laura and the kids over occasionally, to join them for dinner on their back patio. Laura would bring something from her refrigerator. Sometimes, when Jack had also been away, she and Betsy were free to talk about the things that women talk about.

The Carter kids had gotten busier, as school-age kids do, with friends and sports and school activities. She and Mark socialized with younger families in the neighborhood. Dinner in the Carter’s backyard happened less and was more formal, always with husbands and other guests, but Laura continued to enjoy her time with Owen. At the beginning of his teens by then,

it had been impossible to imagine him surly and self-centered. Instead, he would tell her about his friends and things that happened at school and his worries about the world's scary problems. But when Betsy got wind of the conversation she would quickly shift to her strident, “happy” voice, still candy-coated, but not to be contradicted.

“Owen,” she would say, “let Laura enjoy her evening.” She would ask Owen to get something from the kitchen, then insert Laura into an adult conversation.

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Laura glances over from her kitchen window. That damn croquet set! It’s still set up. She can’t quite believe that another backyard party is unfolding, after the car and the hurled insults from the angry kid. But food trays and drinks have been assembled, and there is the youngest Carter kid acting like a clown with his croquet stick. He is working hard to finagle his mother’s laugh, a sound that makes Laura cringe. But Betsy doesn't, she's not paying attention to her youngest son, she is looking at Owen. In the late-early-evening-still-light of summer, Laura can see that Owen has lost weight and shaved off most of his thick, dark hair. Both exaggerate the hollows behind his eyes. He seems merely to be going through the motions of playing a round of croquet with his brother.

Is it becoming an issue how much time she spends watching her next door neighbors? Mark returned the kids to her that afternoon. She'll take them to the neighborhood pool. They can eat dinner at the snack bar. She might even go swimming with them instead of staying hidden and huddled on the pool deck in a lounge chair with a book. They can stay until the pool closes at ten. Her kids will think it is an adventure, swimming that late at night. In the dark, anything imagined can be real. At least that still holds true for her daughter and her guilelessness will draw in her older brother. A crocodile may have escaped from the sewer system and made

its way into their pool. Lurking. They will have to set a trap and catch it, staying in the water until the sky is as dark as a black and blue.

On the drive home the kids are quiet as mice in the back seat. They'd already washed the chlorine out of their hair. Her daughter changed into her pajamas in the dressing room. Only three traffic lights between pool and home but Laura has time to think about how to get through the rest of the night. Her tuckered children will go straight to bed and fall asleep; she can sit in her most comfortable chair, select her playlist "For a Glass of Wine," she named it in a long forgotten playful mood, and read until her eyes are tired.

She smells the acrid smoke and hears the noise of the Carter's "pit" party the minute she turns into the driveway. Damn it. She and the kids have not stayed away long enough. She struggles to imagine a new plan for the evening. She can still tuck the kids in quickly, take a sleeping pill and bring her book to bed, pull down her window shade without even glancing in the Carter's direction. She slides open the van door and the kids stumble out.

Just then there is the distinctive, disturbing squeal of tires. A car is pulling up far onto the Carter's front yard. Her groggy kids turn instinctively in the direction of the sound. A young man -- the same one as the other night Laura guesses -- jumps out of the passenger side of the car with a hoody pulled up over his head. He grabs for something in his jacket pocket. Laura pushes her children down and squats. From that height, she can see through the van's windows that the young man is doing something to the Carter's lawn. She hears a hiss. It is a can of spray paint. What did she think it had been, a gun? He glances over and probably can see her through the window and she feels silly crouched down, as if they need protection from his can of paint. So she stands up and shoos the kids through the kitchen door, saying too loudly that it is late, and time to get to bed. Once inside, her kids want to run to the front window but she forbids it.

“Upstairs. Teeth brushed. Bed in thirty seconds,” she barks.

Only after she has read to her children, tucked and re-tucked them in several times, reassured them that what they saw was just a prank, only then does she return to look out the living room window. The car is gone but it left a deep, muddy semi-circle of tire marks on the grass. Farther up on the lawn, in bright white letters, upside down to her, so that passers-by can read, has been painted the word “KILLER.”

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Laura goes to the bathroom window later, it also looks towards the front of the house. She must have misread what the young man had painted. She had looked so quickly and it was upside down. Laura's mouth is still filled with mouthwash when she lifts the shade. Betsy is in her front yard. On her hands and knees, bare handed. She is yanking out clumps of grass.

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She can't remember when she and Betsy had stopped being friends. She'd not even had the opportunity to tell Betsy that Mark had left her until weeks after it happened. It was garbage night and Laura had been back and forth to the curb, rolling her garbage cans and recycling bins, something Mark had always done, and now the chore had become a ritualistic marker of yet another week's passing.

Mark's seemingly unobtrusive departure -- he packed some bags and loaded up his car while she and their daughter watched their son play soccer -- had in reality plunged her into the deep end. Laura, by then, felt submerged in her grief, like an accidental drowning victim. She knew that she was losing to her despair and dislocation, that she was struggling for air. It left her feeling fuzzy, she might soon forget even to hold her breath.

Betsy had just stepped onto her own side door stoop and bent down to sort some garbage.

“Hi,” Laura managed to say. She struggled to answer when Betsy asked how she was. “Um, not so good. Mark moved out.” And there was some relief, to share this fact with someone known, but removed from the immediacy of her pain.

“What? I don’t understand.”

“He told me one morning that he had stopped feeling loved and needed. That this...” she turned and pointed back to her house, “no longer felt like home.”

“But...” Betsy stopped and actually hugged her, “you’ve made a beautiful home. You’re a wonderful mother.”

“Apparently not.”

“That’s not fair. Is there another woman?”

“Yes.”

“Then that’s just his you know what talking.”

“Maybe, but what do you do when everything you’ve worked towards, when the thing that is, well, you know, the only thing that you’ve made, when someone else decides for you, that thing no longer matters, maybe never mattered.”

“He doesn’t get to decide that.”

“But what if he does, it feels like he did.”

“”Laura, nothing has changed. You are those children’s mother. You have been there for them twenty-four seven. They need you. Nothing else matters.”

“But Mark wants the kids to live with him half the time. He says that I should get a job.”

Betsy shook her head. She gave Laura another hug.

“Please let me know if there is anything I can do.”

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But they had almost no contact after that, except for another brief exchange.

“Owen’s going to be around more, for a little while.” Betsy said.

“Oh.”

“He’s taking a break from school to figure out where to focus his studies. So he can help you with the yard, or moving heavy things. Just let me know.”

Laura began to see Owen going out the side door. He would walk the family dog at mid-day, when everyone else his age would still have been away at college, or working a retail job. Wearing headphones, he hardly looked up from the sidewalk. She finally caught his eye one day when he was in the driveway, and she waved. He took the headphones off.

“Hey, Mrs. Tucker.”

“Hi, Owen. You know you don’t really have to call me that. You’re all grown-up and, I guess, I’m not really Mrs. Tucker anymore.”

“Yeah, my mom kinda told me that.” He smiled uncertainly.

“I hear you’re taking a break from school?”

“Yeah, things weren’t going so well with classes.”

“That happens.” Laura’s turn to smile. “Did you like any of the classes in particular?”

“I had a great English professor, but...I don’t know.”

“You could take some classes, you know to keep up. The community college is getting good reports these days.”

“I don’t know.”

She got him to talk a few other times, Owen shifting his body weight from one foot to another. But in their last few conversations his voice was weary. She began to feel that even her

comments about the weather or the dogs might feel intrusive. After that, Owen stopped taking off his headphones.

Still. She continues to hear the Carter's life when she opens any of her windows. They converse, apparently, only when in different rooms; Betsy's turned-up-at-the-end voice questioning, motivating, curdling as her children escape to the far corners of the house. Laura has always sensed that the family's loudness humiliates Owen. But then, one day, it was his own agitated voice that passed through the exterior walls and landed, like a hurled brick, at Laura's feet. She had paused on the sidewalk in front of their shared driveway. She'd been walking her dog, as she does methodically every day, at the same time, so as not to require intention. The dog was peeing.

"You don't understand what it feels like. I can't get it right. I don't know how to be," Owen talked loudly, but it sounded choked and hollow.

"Honey, we can help you," Betsy said.

"You don't understand. It's.... I don't.... It doesn't feel like it will ever change. You can't fix this."

Laura had felt so nosy, even though that time, she'd been given no choice.

But even more, it made her want to speak to him, in a way that wouldn't seem inappropriate, that she too is in the middle of a scary stall, like a plane that has lost an engine. That for her, too, what was supposed to be life's steady movement in its intended direction has gone, suddenly, off course. It feels unfair. And she panics at the thought of tomorrow, and, the day after that. Does it hurt that he can't turn his fear into strength to step in a new direction? She cannot. Not even a small step, in any direction.

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She's been near the kitchen window more often, hoping to find Owen walking out or back in again. She'll go outside and tell him that he can talk to her. Just like he used to. But he's nowhere to be seen. His car never moves from its spot at the top of the driveway. The other Carter cars continue many times a day to pull up behind Owen's car and to back down and away again. It must feel awful, being left behind. Like the way she feels in the misspent hours before the kids get home, even after she has made the beds and stacked the dishes, walked the dog, returned phone calls, answered emails, and organized the kids' schedules.

Tonight Betsy has come home early. Laura watches as she juggles overstuffed grocery bags from the trunk of the car, her penetrating voice moving into the kitchen before even her body or the bags have made it through the side door.

"Owen? Sweetheart? How was your day?" She sounds upbeat but aggressive. "Everyone will be home soon. Can you come and help me unpack? I'm making your favorite." Laura is sure she hears the exhale of a groan, the faint whisper of "Please...leave me alone," escaping through the bricks.

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She is at the kitchen island later that night, laptop opened, reading her email. The children are out for dinner with their father. She has had several glasses of wine and has picked at some leftovers from the refrigerator. Her fingers are itchy on the keyboard, as if they intend to do something without her permission; she has googled the Carters. Nothing appears on her screen and she pushes down the top of her laptop. It feels unseemly, like she is spying. But before it snaps shut, she pulls it back up again, and types, in addition the name, the name of their county, and "drive by shooting." It's not an accurate description of what has happened, but it feels close.

The only thing she finds is a story about an incident a few weeks before, at the Brickman family farm in the very north part of the county. It had happened late in the evening. Two friends were shooting at bottles. The family kept guns for hunting. A young man, the grandson, 19 years old, shot another young man, a friend, age 20, who later died at the hospital. The shooting was determined to be accidental, and no charges were being filed.

What a sad and pointless way to die. She clicks on a couple of other links that seem to have no relevance. Laura again goes to shut her computer, feeling still like she's done something unseemly. Betsy's parents, Laura remembers, have a farm house somewhere not far from here. The Carters often go visit. Then she remembers Betsy's maiden name.

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She wants to demand the Carters tell her. She deserves to hear it from them. At least the angry visitors have not returned. And the pit parties have stopped for the moment. She understands now, maybe. Betsy's attempt to pull Owen back from the edge. To tell him in her own fabricated way, that it was not his fault that his friend died. They can pretend it didn't happen. Life goes on. But how can Betsy believe that? Pit parties will not save Owen. He, of all people, will see straight to his mother's fear. And he will feel the unfairness. That the dead boy's family had not gotten the chance to shield their son, or help him to smile again.

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She is back at her window, desperate to reach out to Owen, somehow. Her damn dog knows. No matter how much she has neglected him, he will flop in front of her, force her to look into those soft eyes while he exposes his belly, all in a way that says "I know you are doing your best and no matter, I still love you." She could be Owen's mother, she is old enough, but instead she feels the same age as he, on that scary precipice of all things that can barely be imagined, but

with too much time for self-judgment. Thinking, worrying that things might get more awful, or, just maybe -- better. She has it worse, so many more years in which to count up her failures. If she could just let him know that she sees his pain, acknowledge that it is big and ugly, but assure him that he is strong enough to hold it and she will not turn away. But Owen remains a ghost, inside.

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She sees Jack pulling out of the driveway taking his youngest son somewhere. Then the Carter's daughter drives away. For the first time in months Laura knows what she wants to do and she is moving. Moving in the direction she intends. She walks through her kitchen, out the side door, and across their shared driveway. She'll go through the Carter's side door, march up the stairs and let herself into Owen's room. But before she can reach it, she sees Betsy sitting in her backyard, on one of her "fun" chairs, staring at the charred remains of an old pit fire. Laura turns, instead, and lets herself into the gate to the Carter's backyard. Betsy looks up at the sound of the latch clinking. Her eyes are so sad, she does not throw on her regulation smile. Laura realizes how much more comfortable that feels. She approaches Betsy, cautious, as she would approach a cat loose in the neighborhood not sure if it's just lost, or its panicking. Perhaps it is Betsy who really needs her.

"I know what happened." Laura says, Betsy looks confused but then her shoulders sag with her exhale.

"It was an accident," Betsy says.

"That's what the papers say."

"The papers?"

"Well, online."

“Oh, it’s online?”

“How is Owen?”

“He was already depressed, now he won't move from his bed. I'm worried he might be suicidal.”

Laura winces. “I didn’t know, I mean I can see something is wrong...” She trails off.

“I can help,” Laura says a few moments later. “I can stay with him if you need to get out and I can talk to some neighbors about helping with dinners or errands.”

Susan is shaking her head, vigorously, but wordless.

“We all get hit sometime.” Laura says, and Susan’s head movement slows. Laura has a chance to glance up. Owen is at the window, looking down at them.