House

by Elizabeth Hegwood

My husband spends weeks trying to find a place for us to live. Because I'm six months pregnant, we're in a hurry. We want more space for us, a room for the baby, some grass for the dog. Fewer neighbors. Last year's hurricane spiked what used to be college-town prices. Now everything we can afford has a waiting list. Twice, we're told by realtors to come get a key and take a look, but, both times, someone else signs the lease before we get there.

We stop at the only realtor in town we haven't asked, and a woman behind small piles of papers tells us someone turned in a move-out notice earlier that day. A rental house, three bedrooms, she says. Southeast part of town. I ask her what street, and how much. It's two hundred dollars more a month than we want, but we give her a check to hold.

The house is at the dead end, situated in such a way that it's not visible if you're more than a hundred feet away. We're almost in the driveway before we see it.

"Selling point," I say to my husband.

The uprooted pines and water oaks lying in the weeds have been there almost a year. Once they're cleared, there will be a view of the creek, which runs through downtown and has concrete slabs where the banks should be. A clean-out pokes through the grass near the front door. I get out of the car and see cats under the carport; a gray-and-white striped mother, whose shape looks more like a skeleton, is nursing a few black kittens. The black father watches from the yard.

"You've got watermelon," says my mother-in-law, poking around under a leaning dead cypress, ankle-deep in leafy vines. Her spiky blond hair doesn't wilt, even in this heat. She's here to help, to mother me before I become one myself.

"That's kudzu. Probably snakes, Mom," my husband says. The yard's been neglected all summer. The grass is growing seedy and the dandelions are three feet tall, the stalks firm. I walk up to

the cats, and my dog follows. Kittens scatter like fish, but the sturdy male cat rubs against my shin. My dog, not much bigger than the cat, whines and wags. The animals practically hug. After a walk-through, I realize the house needs work. I'm wary, but we will be left alone here, so I turn to my husband and say, “This is it.”

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After college, I moved away from roommates and live-in boyfriends and went back to my coastal hometown. A teacher at the high school heard I was around and talked me into applying. I found a wooden apartment on the beach. Like the stucco motels further down the highway, it was cheap, old enough to look dated, but not appealing enough to be quaint. I liked the gray wood of the balcony, warped from too much moisture and salt, and the overgrown popcorn tree that pressed its leaves into the kitchen window screen. After I moved in, I visited my parents and brothers on weekends sometimes, but I spent most of my free time in the apartment. My mother kept phoning to ask if I was okay by myself, then said I was shutting everyone out.

She was right. I went out for drinks sometimes, and made it to meet-the-teachers nights, but usually I was home. I faked stomach bugs to break plans with friends and let the machine take most of the calls. I didn't miss people. After all, my relationships had all ended because I wanted them to, friendships faded because I was the one who never bothered to call. My apartment was noiseless, save for the CD player and cell phone. I liked being mostly alone and self-sufficient so much, in fact, that for three years I stayed that way, telling myself I should give people a chance, but waiting for them to leave. *Take care,* I said.

After dark, when I didn't feel like reading or writing, I walked across the beach highway, with a comforter if it was chilly, to watch the night fishermen, who waded near the shore, spearing for flounder. I sat in the dark, mashing damp sand like clumps of brown sugar into my palm while the heavy Gulf air blew my hair into ropes.

Sometimes I worried that I was unable to need people, but, as much as the thought upset me, I couldn't make myself truly want them around. Beams of the fishermen's handheld lights darted and flashed, and their rubber boots swished in the shallow black water. Some nights, I counted half a dozen men, but I never heard them speak.

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The semester starts again, and my husband and I are back to the university campus, working and teaching and being graduate students. We're barely in the house two months before everything about it begins to irritate me: the forty-year old green kitchen linoleum, which peels and cracks, the brass cabinet handles, caked with black grime, the rough patches on the old hardwood floors where kick molding was pried off and never replaced, the small hole at the base of the front door where an animal clawed through. The air conditioner breaks twice, and the realtor sends over a man who “shoots nitrogen through it” the first time and, the second time, after condensation leaks into the cabinet above the stove, takes the inside unit apart and then binds it back together with silver tape. I find two gas pipes inside that have never been capped, and when I crouch low beside them, I smell gas. I'm still mad about the strange air-conditioner repair job, so I call the plumber myself. While my husband is at work, I put chains on the doors, do the best I can with the broken casement window locks to keep them from popping open, cover the cloudy Plexiglas six-foot window with paper made to look like real stained glass. I scrub the floors and paint the rusty vents white. The kudzu creeps closer, curling over the downed trees and stunted azaleas.

One buzzing September morning, a pickup parks at the dead end, and a few men come to the door. One of the men, in overalls, removes a floppy hat and tells me he's here to see about the yard. The others are already pointing at the shingles, squinting and considering what to do. Every one of them has a wiry square

beard, except one, who has an old-fashioned curled mustache instead.

“We're going to get these trees up for you, ma'am,” he says.

“You are?” I glance to the truck, looking for another one, a trailer or tractor I might not have seen.

“We're just going to chop them up for you,” he says. “I'm Nell's husband.”

“Nell?” I search my mind for who they're supposed to be. “The realtor?”

“No, that's Sharon. She's Nell's best friend from high school. This is Nell's mama's house. Nell and I've been renting it out since her mama died. She had Alzheimer's, you know. Had this yard beautiful, once. The armoire you see in the kitchen, well, that's staying. Nell's daddy built it into the kitchen and no one can get it out. You may use it if you would just be kind enough to take care of it.”

“Sure,” I say. “We've just got dishes and things--”

“We just couldn't get down here before now to clear these trees. We appreciate you.” He leaves, so I shut the door. A few minutes later, he knocks again, and when I open it, he's holding a tool box and some weather-stripping. He sits down in the living room, patches the hole in the door, tells me the girls that lived here before us had cats. I stand there, one hand on my pregnant belly. He tips his hat again and tells me they'll come back in the morning.

The next day, chainsaws wake me early. The bed is empty, and as soon as I sit up, I hear the back door open and shut, and my husband comes to the bedroom, then takes off his baseball cap.

“They're Civil War re-enactors,” he says.

“Seriously? What are you doing out there?”

“Just talking to them.” My husband takes off his shoes, too, and climbs back into bed. “You should hear the way he says *fascia.*”

I pull a pillow over my head and lift it enough to uncover one eye. “Should I bring out a pitcher of lemonade or something? Isn't that what people do?”

“Already tried to offer them some water. Listen to what he said. He said, ‘No, thank you kindly, sir, but I have a *plethora* of ice cold water here in this cooler.'”

We doze together, and when we wake up, the men are gone. Everything they've touched is fixed.

Two days later, the trees are stacked at the back of the yard where the property line meets the woods. My husband and I discover that the house has a back patio with a brick wall, and the yard is much bigger than we realized. The men have cut down the dead cypress in the front, and, days after that, there are new reflective orange signs at the end of the street to keep cars from driving into the creek. City workers spray the tumbling kudzu with something that makes it dry up and shrink. With the cypress gone, the sunlight falls into the yard in a new way. We pay a man and his teenage son to mow the yard and clear the weeds and vines that have threatened to take over. They ask me if there's anything in the yard they should avoid mowing, but I tell them I don't care about any of it, and to chop whatever they want. For a minute, I want to yank the weeds up myself, but I don't know the difference between pretty weeds and real flowers. I don't know how to do it myself, tend to it properly, make a place where I'd like to read and the baby would like to play. I consider asking the yard man a few yard questions, but instead I say, “It's not mine.”

They mow and weed-eat the space into a real front yard, even if a bit shabby, and the sight of the driveway, dry and bright and cleared of leaves, cheers me up. The kittens begin to dart around, and the father, a gorgeous black creature with a feather-duster tail, watches his family most afternoons from the top of my car. My dog chases them sometimes, but the cats, bored of her already, stop running. I feed them all, and although I feel vague guilt for keeping the cats outside without shots or flea collars, I'm afraid

of what might have moved into the rotting trees and now into the back of the yard, so I tell myself the cats are happy.

After our son is born, I forget about both the weeds and the cats. But the yard takes care of itself in the winter, and the cats, hungry, do the same. A few weeks later, they are gone. Something else in the house, too, despite the happiness brought by our new baby, seems to have left: me. I do not recognize myself physically, and everything else with which I've defined myself in the past — my work, my art, my intellect — becomes useless. The visitors stop coming, and then my mother-in-law, then my mother. My husband goes back to campus. Friends call to ask why I don't keep in better touch, why I don't send more pictures. I do not know what to say, how to explain that every moment is already taken by some kind of need, or that there are days at a time when my husband and I, exhausted to the point of collapse, don't have a proper conversation. What I feel most, though, and what I'm most hesitant to tell them, is that taking care of a baby is the hardest thing I've ever done, and I'm scared. Taking care of health, my education, my relative happiness -— suddenly it feels as if these things required little more than desire and paying attention. They were easy, by comparison. I want this little boy more than I knew was possible, I pay attention to every squeak and movement, but I can't lose the terrible fear that I might not learn how to do it right. This love is different, and new, and alarming.

During a late winter rain, my husband and I in a rare repose, watching a movie on a mattress on the living room floor, a sleeping infant between us, someone knocks. I expect it to be the UPS man, who's delivered all my Christmas gifts this year that I bought for others, since shopping with an infant isn't yet something I've figured out how to do. Our baby stirs, so I lift him from the mattress and follow my husband to the door. A white Suburban with its lights and wipers on hums in the driveway, and a girl, or maybe a woman, stands at the door, her curls heavy with rain, her sweatshirt wet and dark at the shoulders.

“Can I help you with something?” says my husband. I'm in pajamas, so I hide behind him, looking at the girl, the pressing the baby to my chest.

“I'm Nell's niece,” she says. I glance at the car, where another women sits in the driver's seat, talking on her cell phone.

“Everything okay?” he says.

“She don't know I'm here,” the girl says. “This used to be my grandma's house. Did they fix the roof?”

I speak up. “Everything's fine, they came and took care of it all. Her husband, I think.”

“We haven't spoken in a long time,” the girl says.

I squeeze my husband's elbow, but the girl is already on her tiptoes, looking over his shoulder, past me, and into the living room. “I used to play here,” she says. “I just wanted to come by and see it.”

Tell her to come back later, I think, hoping my husband will somehow feel me think it, but he stammers an invitation for her to come inside and look.

She creeps through the house like a stranger, glancing in the rooms, pointing to everything that's the same and different. “It's *yellow*,” she keeps saying, “but I kind of like it.” She stops in the kitchen, and I wonder if she's about to remark on the poor condition of the floor. “I used to play on that armoire,” she says. “My grandpa used to tell me not to hang on it.”

“A baby lives here now,” I say, then feel awkward at my attempt at conversation.

“He's cute.” She takes herself back outside, and looks at the dog at our ankles. “I wonder how big my dog will be,” she says.

My husband nods, and, although I am mentally objecting, he asks her what kind of dog she has.

“I don't know, but his feet are big.” She keeps looking at us, and I hope my husband doesn't tell her she can come back any time, or to stop by if there's ever anything we can do. “Thank you for letting me come in,” she says. “Don't tell Nell I was here, okay? I just wanted to make sure the place hadn't fallen down.”

“Weird,” my husband says, after she leaves and we're back on the mattress.

I sink into him, still holding the baby, feeling vaguely as if I have committed some offense. The new mother I always thought I'd be would have taken care of the girl. When is that person going to make her debut?

The holiday season is a tender one, and passes quietly. My husband and I find moments to be still, and life takes a shape that seems impenetrable by the outside world. One cold evening, my husband stays late at the library, doing research, the baby is asleep, and I'm feeling energetic. I pull out the beautiful new cookbook my sister had given me for Christmas this year, and find a recipe for which I have everything: chicken, flour, vegetables, spices, bourbon. The chicken fries in a skillet, looking exactly like the picture. I heat the bourbon in a sauce pan, add the spices, and go to Nell's mother's armoire to find a box of pasta. When I turn around, the pot is blazing, and I freeze. I try to muster the science of what is happening, the logic, but all I can think is *baking soda,* which I then remember is almost empty. The flames spill over the pot and down the oven onto the floor, like a fire waterfall, a flickering puddle. I drop the pasta, run to the nursery and grab the baby, whistle to the dog, and we stand in the yard while I talk to the dispatcher on my cell phone.

After I hang up, I look through the window into the kitchen, but I don't see anything, even smoke. I pull the baby's blanket around his face and go back to the kitchen. There's nothing there. No heat, nothing withered or singed. Something yellow, the spilled sauce, oozes down the stove, but there's not even a mark where the flames had just been spreading on the green linoleum floor. I call the dispatcher again, and tell her it was a false alarm, but she says she's sending someone anyway. I insist we're really okay, they should save the truck for someone who needs it, but she says they have to come check it out.

The fire truck blocks our whole end of the street, the lights spilling into everyone's yard, catching in other people's

windows. Firemen jump heavily out of the truck, in smoky clothes, their faces serious and kind, truly looking like people capable of saving others. They come closer, dwarfing me, and over and over, I tell them we're okay. My next door neighbor peers through the curtain, but doesn't come outside.

Suddenly I'm nervous; I must say something else to them. “I'll bring you some cookies at the station,” I say, and smile, try to be charming, though I know I won't really do it. They laugh.

One of the firemen goes inside for a look, and when he comes out, he smiles, flashing his silver braces, the face of a kid. “The fumes get condensed, and *poof*,” he says. “Next time you try that, just use a bigger pot.” He touches the side of the baby's head, winks at me, and closes the door behind him too gently for me to bear. Feeling both strange relief at feeling, for a moment, protected by the firemen and frustration at my own ability to be the protector, I call my husband, and I cry.

Eventually, the first winter of bewilderment and sleepless nights eases into a gentle spring. The baby becomes less like an extension of my own body, and I return to work and school for a few hours a day. My husband begins catching up on work of his own, and starts his weekly video-game sessions with the guys. But I feel slow and distant, unable to join conversation. The thought of having to talk to people seems an impossibly heavy task, almost as if I've forgotten how. Some people begin to ask me about it, but I make a lighthearted joke, and then go home. I work around the house, picking up where I left off last summer, a baby strapped to my chest, the dog always close by.

Although time by myself is rare, more than anything, despite the people I see on campus, I am alone. No one sees the heroic moments when I pull off impossible feats of nursing and grading, while wiping a spill on the floor with my toe. Likewise, no one hears the pitch of my voice when I scold the dog for a full morning's disappearance. And, unlike any other time in my life, I find that I'm scared of the silence that follows. I have questions about how to be a good mother, how to give my son what he needs,

and, also for the first time in my life, I can't seem to just learn it, figure it out, *think* of exactly the right things to do.

Some days, I tell my husband that everyone was right, being alone is unnatural and wrong. I cite all the popular talk of loneliness: It is not healthy, our society, with everyone peeking through their windows out of curiosity instead of empathy. Then I call my girlfriends or my sister, or we invite other couples for dinner. None of it helps. I keep thinking about the cats, wishing I'd taken better care of them. I say the names of everything I'd seen growing in the garden, everything I've let die: roses, crepe myrtles, daffodils. Then, inevitably, I think of my son, wondering if he's okay now, and if he's okay at ten, and at fourteen, and at seventeen. I wonder if it's possible to stop the world from closing in on him, or if I'll accidentally look away as he's looking to me for safety. I wonder if this house and my love make our family as happy as I want them to be.

The worries stay with me, but in the meantime, I plant seeds in the kitchen, sprouts that I imagine will eventually be Morning Glories trailing over the brick wall of the patio. I check the shoots several times a day, examine them closely, thinking, surely, I can learn to care for something that needs only water, light, and air.