

Keep a Lid on It

by Fred Osuna

“Oh,” she responded. She used the most nonchalant and casual tone she could muster, not looking up at him, nearly swallowing the syllable.

He'd commented that she was going to miss his birthday, after she had told him that her family was leaving town for a drive up to Raleigh on the coming weekend. He'd wanted her to know when it was. He noticed her slight reply. He wondered if she was pretending not to hear him now, in preparation for not acknowledging the anniversary of his birth later. He thought to mention it again, to make sure she'd heard him — maybe make a little eye contact — but decided against it.

They parted soon after that moment. She went in her house; he walked across the lawns to his place next door. They each closed their front doors. The sun dropped reliably. Eventually, all the windows on the street went dark, each small house cloaking its occupants in a world unto itself, soundproofed and emotionally remote.

The following weekend, they met in the yard again. He asked how the trip to Raleigh had been. She described their roadside breakdown in terse detail, how they'd been stranded for nearly two hours before someone stopped to give them a lift into the nearest town. When the tale ended, she paused, waiting for a consolation from him.

He heard the purposeful break. He knew that the neighborly standard demanded a statement of sympathy, but he could generate none.

“Oh,” he said. “Hm.”

