

Reduced

by Gary Moshimer

There I was at the OPEN HOUSE. It was easy, three doors down. The sign on the lawn said, PRICE REDUCED.

The real estate lady said, “Back again? Thinking of buying”?

I laughed.

There were several couples there. People have short memories.

I was nervous this time. I kept tapping walls, touching everything twice. People looked at me.

When they headed upstairs I hung back. I opened the basement door and crept down. Everything was new — the concrete floor, bright fluorescent lighting; cinder block walls scrubbed. I walked to the corner where the previous owner had kept her, the girl of ten, for a year, in a little room he'd bricked himself. Padlocks, steel door; dirty mattress. Here in the nice neighborhood.

I was on the crew that demolished the room with sledge hammers. It was an act of violence. We hauled the bricks to a guy that ground them to dust, like someone's ashes. The door was melted in the steel man's hell furnace. Every couple days the crew chipped in to send flowers to the girl, safe with her mother.

I remember what we found scratched into the brick: Susan Peterson born 2003, died ----. She did it with her fingernails.

The footsteps were above. Someone ran water and I listened to the pipes. I thought about focusing on one sound to stay alive.

When the basement door opened, I hid under the steps. The men came halfway down to take a peek. There wasn't anything to see; it was spotless. They climbed back up and shut the door. Then she locked it, which I knew was something she did automatically, because it was a terrible place.

I listened to them leave. She probably thought I was gone.

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There was a new casement window. The old one had been painted black. We had smashed that with our hammers as well.

I jumped and flipped the lock. The window swung down, sharp edge cutting my arm. I popped the screen with my pocket tool and dove out. My blood ran down the cinderblocks, already soaking in. I jammed the screen and rolled across the lawn to the line of spruce trees, crawling through them to the street.

A car rolled by me slowly — a couple from the open house, getting a sense of the neighborhood. I smiled and waved with my bloody arm, but they didn't wave back.

I went in my back door, but my wife was there in the kitchen. "Now what?" she said.

"Trimming accident."

I went to the bathroom and locked the door. I cleaned up. Out the window I saw my eight-year-old, Holly, riding her bike on the street. I yelled at her, "Get off the street! Stay in the driveway!"

Looking at my face, she started to cry. I always scared her. I wouldn't let her do anything.

My wife pounded the door. In the mirror, my face was ugly.

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