

Neighbors

by Jen Michalski

She sees the little girls in the yard through her front window. They're as naked as the day they were born, not far from the event itself. They dip backward and forward like pitchers, laughing, balling up their little white fists and shaking them like they're playing craps. She moves away from the window quickly, as if their margarine skin could stretch from the yard and in through the keyhole to strangle her. *A person could get in trouble for something like this*, she thinks, and since she just moved here, she doesn't need any.

When she peers out again they are gone, back in their own yard next door, drowning in beach towels with pictures of red and orange furry muppets.

"The lady that lived there before you used to let my girls play in her yard," the pregnant neighbor man says. He is so pregnant that when he sits down on the glider on his porch neither naked girl can sit on his lap. He doesn't say anything else, and she wonders whether she also will have to be so accommodating with her yard. There are mushrooms in the grass, she notices. Poisonous, perhaps. What if they trip and knock their little corn teeth out on her chipped sidewalk?

But this issue seems overwhelmed, irrelevant, by the man's pregnancy. He is wearing a shirt for obese men. It hangs on his arms and shoulders like drapes before stretching across his stomach. His feathered hair, silver with a dark shock in the middle, like a negative skunk, hangs over his ears and inches toward the bottom of his neck.

"This one will be easier." He pats his stomach before pointing a finger, plump like a sausage link, at the beach-blanketed girls. "They're twins."

"How did you get pregnant?" she asks. She figures the situation's absurdity will forgive her rudeness.

"I was born with parts," he answers vaguely. She looks at her bare hands. Her divorce wasn't cheap, although this neighborhood was. She wonders if this is why, if there are hormones in the drinking water making men pregnant, poisonous mushrooms on the lawn.

"It was nice meeting you." She backs into the house and resists the urge to look out her windows again, although she can hear them, the girls, squealing and, at some point, crying. She does not check to see whether they're clothed. She concentrates instead on her crushed soda can, the fishbowl of rocks on the magazine table she thought would look decorative but instead looks heavy and empty, the afternoon light striping through the blinds and onto the wall.

She does not know what she wants. After five years of marriage, at 28, she thinks maybe she wants to be watcher of things. Like TV. Like muggings. Like naked girls on her treacherous lawn. She wants to be a vessel that time fills safely with sand, not miscarriages, indigestion, tumors.

The next morning, the little girls are on her porch in matching yellow and pink sundresses. Their sandy curls whorl around their heads like crowns. They reach up to her with gifts, little red Play-Doh hamburgers and yellow French fries. She takes them out of courtesy but does not eat them.

"Does the mother work out of the home?" She asks the pregnant man, who is on the glider eating a grape Popsicle. She can hear the jumpy, cheery sound of preschool programming on the television vibrating from his open window.

"What are you talking about?" He chortles mid-bite. "There is no mother."

"But—"

"All you need is love, baby." He moves his Popsicle stick in and out of his mouth thoughtfully. "If you must know, I'm on maternity leave. Does the husband work out of the home?"

"I'm divorced." She looks at the junk mail as if she has received something captivating. "And I'm a teacher. I'm on summer break."

"I'm sure the girls will love that." He nods down to the twins, who are grounding yellow Play-Doh into her concrete.

"I'm sure," she repeats, although she does not know what this means. She goes inside, takes a nap with the blinds closed. She leaves the Play-Doh food on her dresser, and when she wakes up, it's hardened and flaked.

When she goes out in the evenings, to the gym, to the park to jog, the hangover of the twins' revelry lays limp around the porch like party streamers. Play-Doh, sticky bubble larvae shining purple-pink-yellow in the waning light of day, Popsicle sticks, spilled milk. Plastic barrettes with chicks and ducks on them. She puts everything in a shoebox and means to take it to the pregnant neighbor when it's full, to shame him into keeping the twins in his own yard. But after awhile she can't bear to part with it, her little diorama of their lives. She rearranges the bits and pieces, wonders each day what will be added, what she will do when it is packed to the brim. She imagines lining her basement with little shoeboxes like a mausoleum. She thinks about everything she has lost.

One day she is wiping dust out of the goldfish bowl. She thinks about buying a betta. She is imagining pressing the slippery red fan fins against her skin when her door rattles furiously. She opens it to find the neighbor man on the porch, the twins on either side of him. He's wearing a big-man Pink Floyd t-shirt and shorts, the low waist of which looks like it's cutting off the circulation to his testicles, his feet squeezed into flip-flops. There is a cab waiting in the street.

"Can you watch the girls for awhile?" he asks. "I think I may be early."

"You want me to come?" She asks, feeling a little excited. She would be lying if she wasn't curious as to how it will all happen, down there with the parts.

"Nah — my brother-in-law is meeting me. If you can just watch the girls for a little while, I would owe you a bunch."

"No problem," she opens the door a bit wider to allow them entry, is slightly ashamed for a moment, as if they will judge the dark, sunless rooms with bare corners. She wonders whether she has left knives on tables, glass in the wastebasket. The girls tumble into the space, staring wide-eyed at her books, her lack of anything shiny or

bright or pink, she imagines. She finds the public radio channel on television, the one with the singing and dancing muppets, and settles them in front. She brings them the shoebox of their detritus. They look inside with curiosity, astonishment, as if they're never seen the items before. They pick up huge handfuls in their little fingers, and wave them slowly in front of them, as if they are magicians. She grabs their stomachs and tickles. They drop the items like slot machines, their eyes squint, their cheeks swell, and they've jackpotted her heart.

She wonders how it is done. She wonders whether the pregnant man will carry one for her.

But suddenly they scream, red tomato faces. She tries to pick each one up and carry her around the living room. She dances them in circles. She shushes them. She screams at them. Finally, she lies on the floor, fingers in her ears, and looks up at them. They are giants looming over her. One by one, they bend over and take hold of her stomach with their little corn teeth. She feels the sting, is surprised that they draw blood, before sleeping.

She dreams of her ex-husband in their old garage, fucking the girl from his job. The girl is pressed against a half-inflated pool raft; her husband's bare ass thrusts, jiggles. She feels her chest filling with pool water, with chlorine. When she wakes up, she realizes the girls have fallen asleep on her, their little heads pressed near her breasts, thin rivers of drool escaping their mouths. She does not know she has been here. The door is vibrating. She carefully pushes the girls aside, makes her way to open it.

It is the neighbor man, and he is still pregnant.

"False alarm," he explains from the porch, holding a bucket of chicken in one hand, his flip-flops in the other. "Man, am I starved. You eat?"

She can't remember the last time she ate, but she feels inexplicably full. She rubs her stomach, her little twin sores itching, and she knows what grows there. How it is done.

