

Arroyo Vista

by Noria Jablonski

In some parts of town, people are not allowed to grow vegetables because of the plutonium used in the Lab. Three local parks were recently found to be contaminated. We're lucky to live far enough away from the Lab that plutonium isn't a problem, but still I wouldn't want to grow vegetables, just to be on the safe side. My husband Paul works at the Lab, but what he does there I couldn't tell you. It's top secret.

We live in a community—we're not supposed to say subdivision—called Arroyo Vista. *Arroyo* means stream, although there is no stream. There is a dry ditch that sometimes floods during the rainy season, that's what Linda in the Arroyo Vista sales office tells me. We've only been here since July. When we moved in there was a red carpet from the street to our front door, and a ribbon tied across our stoop. Linda handed Paul a giant pair of scissors to cut the ribbon.

This used to be a rock quarry. Thirty years ago two men kidnapped a busload of schoolchildren and held them captive in an underground storage container right here in this very quarry. The kidnappers wanted several million dollars. After being buried alive for almost a day, the children dug themselves out. They were all okay, just embarrassed that they had soiled themselves, and the kidnappers were caught. One of the kidnappers said he'd done it because he wanted to make his parents proud and show them he was capable of making it on his own. He thought stealing a school bus full of kids was a good, solid plan. He was just a kid himself.

Those children are as old as I am now, some older. An experience like that would mark you forever. There must be some part of them that is here still.

"Owen, no! Bad!" my daughter Ella shouts. I turn to see my one-year old stuffing the cat's coughed-up hairball into his mouth. Owen puts everything in his mouth, and when you take it away he wails. I latch Owen onto my boob to quiet him. On TV the news channels are

all noisy about the politician who cheated on his wife. His wife who has cancer. What kind of man cheats on his dying wife? This man might've been president.

When Owen is done nursing, I turn off the TV and tell the kids it's time to go visit the model homes.

Outside, the light is weird and yellow, filtered through a haze of smoke from wildfires burning elsewhere. Before the politician admitted to cheating on his wife, the news was all about the fires. My eyes burn a little and my chest is tight. I can't see the mountains, I can't see anything past Arroyo Vista, nothing but brownish-white. "This is for you," Ella says, gifting me with a dead leaf. Lining the sidewalk are newly-planted trees, scrawny and shadeless. A hum rises up from the sidewalk, through the soles of my sandals, and the bones in my feet buzz with the sense of some activity deep down, the ground threatening to move, to give way: a sinkhole, an earthquake, or dozens of tiny fingers scrabbling against the clay dirt.

"Look at our shadows," I tell Ella. "They're wearing platform shoes." I stamp my foot to make my glam-rock shadow stamp his, testing the ground's firmness, daring it to cave. Ella copies me. We turned the clocks back last weekend and now darkness comes early. Kay Hernandez waves to us from her front yard across the street. The photographer is with her, camera resting on his hip, hanging from a strap slung around his neck. The Hernandezes live in a One. We originally wanted a One, a single-storey Craftsman-style bungalow, but the two-storey Two was a better bargain, and it had bigger closets. I wave back and keep moving, past the finished Ones, Twos, Threes, and Fours—some with garages on the right, some on the left, all painted in neutral shades of blue-gray, tan, or pale yellow—and past the bare wood skeletons of new homes in progress. I wonder what the photographer sees in Kay, what makes her so special. Her husband Jay works at the Lab, too. Kay and Jay. And their kids Ray, Fay, and Anna May.

The photographer moved onto Vineyard Lane earlier this month. Apparently he's quite famous. I flipped through his books at Barnes

& Noble. One was all pictures of his parents: his dad practicing his golf swing in front of the TV, his mother standing over an uncooked turkey, her head cut off by a shadow. The other book was about pornography. The pictures themselves weren't pornographic. Yes, there were naked people, porn stars, but they weren't sexy unless you consider a naked guy hunched over the kitchen sink sexy. The kitchen cabinets were the same ones we have. Same dishwasher, too. The photographer's latest project is us, Arroyo Vista. Someday Kay Hernandez might hang on a museum wall.

Inside the sales office, the refrigerated air gives me goose bumps. Linda sits at her desk in an alcove, phone clamped between her ear and shoulder. A display case contains an Arroyo Vista site plan, a map showing each of the houses, many marked with red pins that say SOLD, and gray lots where houses are yet to be built. In the future, when all the empty lots are built up and all the houses marked SOLD, the model homes will be sold last, and this office will become the garage of model home number Four.

Linda holds a plastic key card towards me, and I take it gratefully. If she thinks it's strange that we often visit the model homes, she doesn't let on. The model homes are good for a couple times a week, especially now that our favorite park is mildly radioactive.

We skip the Four. Too big, too much space, I could never imagine living there. The Three has a front porch with a swing, very Mayberry. I've never seen anyone who lives in a Three using their front porch, ever. Although the Bufords, who have a Two like we do and no front porch, sometimes set up chairs in their driveway on weekends. I don't know what their deal is. Maybe they like to watch cars go by or people mowing their lawns. I slip the key card into the slot on the Three's door. I ease Owen's stroller over the threshold and into the living room, which is furnished ultra-modern, the opposite of Mayberry: chrome lamps with flying-saucer shades, a boxy black leather sofa and matching loveseat, and a massive glass-top coffee table. Ella takes off her shoes, as we have taught her to do when she comes into someone's house, and I liberate Owen from the stroller. He immediately heads for the coffee table, on which sits an

enormous bowl filled with mirror-spangled balls, like grapefruit-size disco balls. "Ba," he says, pointing excitedly. "Ba, ba, ba!"

"Yes, balls," I say. *Ball* is his first word. Owen's other word is *wow*. Those are his only words, for now. No *mama*, no *dada*. Balancing on his fat little sausage-y feet, he grasps for the lip of the bowl and I push it out of his reach. He couldn't play with the balls even if I'd let him, because the balls are glued into the bowl.

Beyond the living room is the dining room. It's actually one big room, divided into a living area and a dining area. Maroon cloth napkins folded like pope hats perch on square plates. The cutlery is oversized, making you feel as if you've eaten from the side of the mushroom that makes you shrink, and the wine glasses have no stems. We would never decorate our own house like this. Paul and I still have what we call grad school furniture: a cat-hair covered Ikea couch, my futon from before we lived together, his dead grandfather's recliner, my mom's old dinette set. When you have small children and a pukky cat, it's pointless to have expensive furniture. Owen is teething the edge of the glass coffee table. I pull him away and he cries the way he always does when I take something out of his mouth.

With Owen on my hip, making his sad siren wail, I head for the back of the house, through the kitchen and into the family room. All Arroyo Vista family rooms have gas fireplaces with artificial logs. Ella's face is pressed against French doors that open onto the back yard, where there is a slate patio, a gas grill, and a dark blue pool. I plop onto the charcoal chenille sectional sofa. I watch the reflection of me and Owen on the blackened flat-screen TV. As he nurses, he plays with my hair.

"Let's go swimming," Ella says.

"It's not our pool," I say. "And, anyway, we don't have our bathing suits."

"We could go in naked," she says.

"It's not our house. We're just visiting."

"Let's play something," she says.

"We are playing," I tell her. "We're playing house."

