

Clearance

by Susannah Felts

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He led her blindfolded through the kitchen, down the back steps to the backyard. "Birthday girl," he had whispered to her this morning, offering her coffee in bed.

She would not be expecting what he had waiting for her. It was not one of her modest suggestions; a basket for her bicycle or a new rose from the lawn and garden shop, to replace the one that had caught a strange virus this spring and shriveled to a black crisp after holding out the promise of several tightly wound buds, their orange petals seen only as bright slivers. The basket, too, was a needed thing, thanks to unlucky chance. She had taken to riding her bicycle to the supermarket every day, after he'd been out of work for some time. A few things at once, and no surplus going to waste. She told him she liked it—blood being pumped, muscles toned, pennies saved.

Then one day, out from nowhere ran a squirrel. It tangled in her front spokes. It shrieked—that's what got her the worst—and she went down, mouth against gravel, the bike basket crumpled. The squirrel lurched away, blood leaking from its nose. She thought to go after it but didn't. What could she do for a dying squirrel, she'd said to him, pushing her dinner plate away.

What now, or ever. She wore the scrape for weeks, a mean mark across her face that never stopped startling him. He was surprised it bothered her as little as it did. He told her he'd try to bang the basket back into shape, but it was sitting in the tool shed still, facilitating cobwebs.

He preferred she drive, was what it came down to.

Summer came, and with it, a little fortune; a temporary job managing a city pool. Perry was grateful for it, took pleasure in each morning's Ph test, when the pool was at its most inviting, an untrammled turquoise. When it was his. He began getting to work early, making time for a dip. Every day he watched happy

people—women, children mostly—splashing or basking, dipping their feet to stay cool. At night, he saw the commercial, the same one every time: the Watson's girl, mascot for her father's pool, spa, and billiards business. The Watson's girl was a veteran at this, the same one from his youth, the one whose heart-shaped face and cleavage the whole town smirked at. You lived in this town any time at all, you knew the Watson's girl. Knowing her could be a test of citizenship. *You from here? Then who's the Watson's girl?* Years ago she had waved in a bikini, propped on an elbow in a tanning bed. Only she was older now, the sun damage creasing her zealous smiles, her body lumpy underneath a thin cardigan.

She's really gained, his wife remarked one night. Perhaps she had a baby, but why didn't they get the baby in on the sell, too? she mused.

Because no one wants to think about the Watson's girl becoming the Watson's mom, he thought. Not that he had a problem with the girl as a mother. He just did not want to be further reminded of his own inevitably rising number of years. For the first time ever, he noticed the end of the season deals she offered, the lure of closeout prices, and thought, not bad. The news said jobs were coming back. An investment. Next summer, they would cool their feet in their own oasis, quietly, without worry. She'd stir up a pitcher of margaritas in those special cups she liked to use every summer. What was a savings for. He could see it clear as day.

He removes the blindfold—one of his ties, musty from the closet—and watches her react. She feels the weight of his crinkling smile.

You can't express dismay about a new pool sitting in your backyard. You cannot cry, you cannot ask why, you cannot think about the winter coming so soon, the crisp leaves that will settle in the water, turning to muck, another surface to clear, to wipe clean.

