

couch reading the paper, shirt off, brown belly rising and falling, reading glasses poised on the tip of your nose, mouth slightly open, tongue gliding back and forth across bottom teeth. I was trying to read a magazine, drinking a frozen margarita from one of the cactus mugs. There was a review of the most recent Coen brothers' film and I remembered when we saw *Raising Arizona* together, our third or fourth date. Your laughter—deep-timbred, floating up and into the darkened theater, spreading out over us—had all the warmth of a bathtub on a freezing night and I knew then that I was in love with you.

There was a still in the magazine from the picture, glossy and reflecting overhead light, the photo of an up-and-coming starlet, a Jane Something, a young beauty with curly blond hair, dressed in Depression-era clothing, stylish rounded hat pulled low on her head, coolly smoking, staring off-camera. I felt a shiver as if a ghost were tickling the back of my neck with bony fingers and sipped my drink, smiled, tried to sound light, not desperate.

“That new Coen brothers' film is out.” Brief glimpses of our past flitted through my head like a movie montage: running through the rain to a theater, holding hands in a coffee house and trying not to giggle at the come-on lines coming from a long-chinned guy at the next table, ironically speaking words and phrases like *mojo*, *P.C.*, *thousand points of light*. Coltrane's “Up ‘Gainst the Wall” was on the stereo and I had the giddy feeling that my words, my simple and perhaps pitiful request, were scating from my mouth, an ineffectual Sarah Vaughan: “Do you think we could go this weekend?”

“Hm?” you said, as you had been saying all that morning, all that week, all that summer. The sound of your voice was like a punch in the stomach—sudden, painful, frightening—and it drove me outside to rip up the lawn, to dig down until I could feel the damp, cool soil beneath my fingernails, taking its scent through my nose and into my lungs, letting my rage rain on the earth, willing it to yield its secrets.

FONTANEL



When Martin turns, I'm going to hit him over the head with the rolling pin. He won't expect me to do something like that. He thinks I'm a mouse, that I don't even know how to feel rage.

Getting a beer from the refrigerator, he sits at the table, looking out the window. “How much longer is it going to take?” he asks, twisting the cap off.

“A while.” I roll the dough, punch out cookies shaped like trees and then take the leftover, roll that. I place them carefully on the greased pan. The child in the apartment above pounds across the floor.

“God, he's been running back and forth all morning.” Martin sips beer, watching it snow.

I open the oven, sliding the cookies into the hot interior. “They tend to do that.”

“Would you look at that. The glare on the snow is blinding. It's snowed for twenty-four hours, I think.”

He seems to have forgotten our earlier fight, meticulously removing every fragment of anger and moving on. The sounds from above intensify like a drum roll, but less rhythmic. I am trying to master my feelings as I walk toward Martin, rolling pin in hand.

“Did you see the gaudy outfit the kid's mother was wearing yesterday?” he asks, pointing a thumb at the ceiling.

“I didn't notice.” I heft the rolling pin. Martin looks at me, and then through me, not seeing any danger.

“Christ,” he says, tears running down his cheeks, “how long has it been?”

“A year, three weeks, six days.”

“I miss Henry so much. I'm off. I'm off everyday.”

“That's what you've been saying.” The tears are really running now. “This story is getting old. In fact, it wasn't very interesting the first time you told it.”

“Well, *excuse* me. How am I supposed to feel?” The upstairs father

drives the family minivan slowly past our window in the falling snow, head swiveling as he looks for parking. “You won’t talk and the snow’s falling and you’re baking cookies and that brat keeps running back and forth. Shut up!” he screams at the ceiling, the tendons in his neck standing out like wires.

I watch our neighbor, unlucky at parking, driving to the corner and turning. A cloud runs in front of the sun and we’re plunged briefly into shadow.

“Do you think many of our fellow townfolk are also stuck at home today?” I ask.

Martin blows his nose into a tissue, seems to shrug. “Will you go for a walk with me?” he asks. “I need some air.”

“I used to go for walks...”

“Dear, please...”

“I would take Henry out in his stroller to the park every day. It wouldn’t really matter what the weather was like. All days were the same—he wanted to be outside. What’s the name of that book we read in grad school, the African one with the guy? His name was Okonkwo or something like that...”

“I can’t remember,” he sighs.

“That was just three years ago.”

“It was a *lifetime* ago.”

He watches another car making its way down our street, wheels tracing the furrows of snow. “We’ve read so many books between us,” I say. “The plots are all gone. Where do they go?”

Martin is drawing a breath as he watches this car go. Will he speak with this new oxygen, attempt to answer my question? Artists, no matter how prolific and driven they are in their work, are slow to act, sluggish in the practical things of the world. It seems so recently that we got our graduate degrees and moved here to this cold city in the north to forge our careers, make our way as writers.

Since I was a teenager, I thought that after poetry, everything else came last, even sex. And then for the next twenty years my one goal was to make better poems. Now, that seems like the most ludicrous of activities, almost obscene in its worthlessness. Martin is working on his second novel, still writing each morning.

The child above screams “Wheeee!”

Martin turns his head so that his bald spot faces me like a bull’s-eye, but more delicate.

Jennifer Fortin

FROM *We Lack in Equipment & Control*

Spring has one thing to offer, a breach that husks us like foreplay
 The world’s first rhyme will someday come back around,
 governed by the unimpeachable, by such mad & marvelous
 graces as a pony’s eye, & even more so, should this assumption
 prove consistent, what serendipity, if not, looting & banditry, hidden
 expenses, sabotage of savings, you ought to roll up the tarmac, get a territory
 February accelerates in dog years, its distances lightyears
 You ought to hold me at arms’ length for the administration
 You ought to ask whether I was one of the storm’s thousands powerless
 When we met, your reflex was to flood the village,
 create a dam for power, we were made jealous

of the bell tower, the only sound above water
 You ought to be told that drought uncovered the village recently,
 even while a dry snow invested in its squall, unheard of environment
 Cancelled ground doesn’t budge now, healthy
 From here on out I customize the uncovered mouth
 This is where men work around me at my request
 This is where men trade evacuation maps for provocation itineraries
 This is where men expose the top ten fields losing people fast
 Since their perimeters touch, except the outermost,
 it’s really one field losing people

Jason Joyce

THERE IS VOMIT IN MY STOMACH



Kim's mother is writing a letter to the STAR testing headquarters to explain why some of the standardized testing booklets are covered in blood.

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4/18/2012

To Whom It May Concern:

At W.E. Houston Middle School testing is conducted in homeroom. Today in the biology lab homeroom, one of the students finished his test early and decided to draw the class's "pet" boa constrictor. The snake is kept in the back corner of the room in a floor-to-ceiling wood and Plexiglas enclosure that was built by the school's woodshop teacher a few summers ago.

Kim has no interest in being a guidance counselor like her mother. She would prefer to be an international ghost hunter like her father. But he doesn't come around often anymore and the community college doesn't offer many courses on the paranormal.

Theodore Cunningham, Test Taker #334712, was the student involved in the incident. He is one of our African American students and his father is a successful door-to-door attorney on TV with that little jingle where he sings, "Any case settled for \$99 down/ we're the fastest law firm in town".

In order to "better sketch the boa constrictor's scales" (Theodore's words), he opened one of the feeding hatches to the snake's enclosure. When the boa has swallowed a meal it is not able to fit through any of the feeding hatches. But on an empty stomach it can squirm through one of the square holes, making the design somewhat counter intuitive.

When building the snake enclosure, the shop teacher's attempt at making a zoo-worthy habitat for large reptiles was very successful. His general lack of zoological knowledge is the only flaw in the design. Nevertheless, it has been all the talk here, and our students seem to really love the renovated biology room, with all its live and taxidermy creatures.

Kim had last seen her father on TV at a Mayan plaza in the middle of a humid jungle. He was searching for proof that the ruins in the area were haunted by an American couple that died on their honeymoon vacation.

Though as far as Kim was concerned, her father had yet to discover a specter that could fill his absence back home. Not so much for her anymore, but for her two younger sisters. Because of this, Kim is not sure how to tell her mother that this too will be her career.

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Theodore had his head very near the open feeding hatch when the snake struck him. It latched on to his eyebrow and then tried to choke him. Molly Warren, the first-year teacher proctoring the test, saw the commotion and moved quickly to the back of the room to assist the student.

Kim's grandmother will also need to be informed. It was her small lump sum lottery winning that paid for Kim's stint at the community college where she spent three years getting a "Create your own Adventure" associate's degree. It was a new program put on by the administration to increase enrollment. In the end, Kim's diploma ended up reading: educator/counselor/crime scene investigator.

Panicked and flailing, Theodore knocked over stools and microscopes, and made an all-around mess of the supply shelves near the snake enclosure. He was screaming F-bombs and Ms. Warren kept yelling, "Oh shit," as she tried to pry the snake's jaws open. The rest of the students, though in a frenzy, began to cheer her on, exhibiting the

school spirit we so proudly strive for at Houston Middle School.

When Kim is about to break the news, her youngest sister comes into the room.

“Momma, there is vomit in my stomach.”

“Oh no sweetie, you’re not feeling well again?”

“No. I better not go to school tomorrow.”

The third graders have been going to the computer lab on Wednesdays to learn typing skills. Kim’s sister is afraid of the computers and routinely becomes ill on Tuesday nights.

And each time she and Kim’s mother go through the motions of their little dance with the same outcome: Kim’s sister goes to school the next day under the premise that, if she sits quietly in the computer lab and doesn’t throw up on the keyboard, they will go to Burger King for dinner and she can have a chocolate shake with her meal.

Ms. Warren was bitten several times, but managed to remove the snake from Theodore’s face. Both of them are okay, but were sent to the hospital for antibiotics.

We appreciate your understanding of the matter and hope that this incident will not negatively effect your S.T.A.N.D.A.R.D.S. accreditation of the school.

From what we can tell, the blood and snake bile have not made any of the tests illegible, but as a matter of courtesy, I wanted to inform you as to how the substances arrived on some of the testing booklets and bubble sheets.

An Aztec voodoo woman ghost returned home with Kim’s father after one of his early travels to a jungle temple in South America. They were told she was just a business acquaintance that needed a place to stay for a few nights. But the ghost woman became increasingly rude and finally outright disrespectful of their home, making messes and causing unnecessary drafts as she careened about the house.

Kim’s mother became suspicious of adulterous acts between the ghost and her husband. Clearly though, the ghost woman didn’t know any better, having lived in a fusty temple for all those years.

Please accept the enclosed boa constrictor’s tooth as a commemorative artifact of this incident. When the snake was removed from Theodore, one of its fangs stayed lodged in his forehead, and frankly, we feel that STAR Testing Inc. should have it, in light

of your understanding.

In a house of interpreters, everything is done based on hunches and intuition. Searching for motive and meaning behind misguided students’ words, listening for voices in the background of videotape static, interpreting the malicious clack of the keyboard in the computer lab.

Kim and her sisters understand it was the right thing to do, sending their father away, but they aren’t sure why their mother still sobs when REO Speedwagon songs come on the radio.

We look forward to your upcoming visit to our school. During your stay, we hope that you will be able to join us for an honorary tree planting ceremony to celebrate the conclusion of the school renovation. Hopefully this will also mark the final steps in our S.T.A.N.D.A.R.D.S. accreditation process.

*Sincerely yours,
Tabitha Roth*

Tomorrow night she will do it, Kim thinks to herself. That’s when the time will be right to break the news. As soon as her mother and sister return home from Burger King.

All of her friends’ parents seemed happy when they learned their children would be leaving home to work retail jobs and live in basement apartments across town. And maybe her classmates were on to something. Violating their leases and painting murals to cover the smoke stained walls, stealing Tabasco sauce and napkins for their kitchens, having sex in the shower, vacuuming the living room whenever they pleased; it was the next step. It was their way of trying to capture proof that there was something more.

Rebecca Hazelton

To Make The New Loss Old

Reduce the particular
 to the particulate—
 once a brick,
 now dust, once a woman,
 now drifting cells

and if those cells
 amass around the bark of a tree
 and I should inhabit that tree from now on,

if that tree is overtaken
 by wisteria, drowned in a flood
 16 of purple blossom—

When we talk about how we die, swamped
 by overgrowth in one way or another, our voices thin,
 the wind in the cuts on our throats
 pipes out
 the received wisdom
 of our parents, theirs, we promise each other
 some constant
 after this, an after to this ever.

There was a man I loved and when I was done
 I still remembered the hot surprise
 of his face near mine,
 a kiss sealing a mash note,
 the newness of it
 like teenagers parking
 near the dam, security lamp haloes.
 For him I became another
 disappointment. But I remember

how he'd clear his throat
 before closing arguments,
 the long silence in the dark bedroom,
 his grasping hands,

 how there are days
 when what climbs us provides
 a support,
 when the choking leaves and blossoms
 like bunches of grapes
 are a beautiful canopy,
 a respite from the sun, from the voices singing *after, after.*

George David Clark

Cinematic Lullaby with Handheld Camera

18 First you'll see the ceiling fan
 in low-light turning slowly,
 hear the same plinking of metal chain
 once and once against the fixture.
 This should tell you something about time,
 how the woman—you'll know now,
 by attention to the pastel valence,
 there's a woman—how she has no use for it,
 how silence punctuated by these brassy hiccups
 might measure something else: not seconds
 evaporating in a thin sweat off her body,
 but the subtle increase of attention
 in the air above the bed. Notice, when you pan
 across the space between the windows,
 where a clock could be, but isn't.
 You'll understand when you finally
 focus on the sleeper, that this will never be
 one of those mawkish dramas that would call
 on her to rise stand before the blinds
 in some display of patent loneliness. It's possible
 instead that she might sleep all night, certainly
 as long as the man can keep himself still
 in the doorway. That's his shadow you see,
 and the camera's, wavering there
 on the sheets, stirred by the work of the fan.

Honeymoon in Mexico

Here is another perfection
 of tan lines and confidential skin:
 this young woman, a stranger,
 standing at the opposite balcony
 in the iguana-creep of darkness west,
 allows the first measures of sunlight
 to mark her nakedness. All else
 stays veiled a moment longer
 in the fragile umbra, even
 the white-washed columns,
 this hammock canted at the ocean,
 the anthology of wedding verse
 I had brought out here to read.

NONFICTION

Shane Velez

NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH



Mom and Dad let me start riding my bike to school in the fourth grade. I wanted to sooner, but they were the type of parents that made the gutter at the end of my cul-de-sac the boundary of my unsupervised world. Riding my bike to school created the opportunity to adventure beyond this boundary, even if that adventure meant riding no more than a mile.

20 I still remember my first ride to school. I woke up early, dressed, ate, and strapped on my helmet. I pedaled out into the morning air and started riding around my cul-de-sac, staying within my boundaries as if I needed to gain momentum to break them. I went around once, pedaling slowly but gaining speed to sling-shot myself over the wide gutter at the end of the cul-de-sac. Once I broke the barrier, I delighted in this tiny slice of freedom. I rode through my community, carefully sticking to my parents' pre-outlined path. Once I arrived, I locked up my bike, walked on to campus, and started anticipating the ride home.

I could have taken two different routes to get to Callie Kirkpatrick Elementary School. The first, the one I took, meant riding through the houses of my community out to my town's main road. The other meant riding out to a more isolated road. The outer houses of my housing tract sport a six foot tall stone wall in their backyards rather than the standard five foot tall wood fence. The stone wall stood on one side of this secluded street while a large vacant field rested on the other. Mom and Dad forbade me from traveling down this isolated road because they said someone could snatch me up without anyone seeing.

Dad gave me specific instructions to follow in the event of an attempted abduction. If I saw a car pulling up next to me, I should drop my bike and

run to the nearest house, screaming and banging on the door. If the potential abductor somehow closed in on me without my noticing, I should cling to my bike. "He'll have a real hard time getting you in his car if you're holding on to your bike," he said. If the abductor got to me at a time while I was separated from my bike, I should fight dirty. "Scream, scratch, kick him in the balls, jab your thumbs into his eyes. Don't let him get you in his car."

I used to spend a lot of time at a friend's house. His single mom worked a nine-to-five job and so she could not exert the same type of control over him as my own did over me. We used to ride long boards all over our home town; often just for the sake of riding as long and far as we could. On our first ride, I remember expressing my concern about stranger abduction. He looked puzzled, as if he'd never considered it, but—after a few moments of thought—he said, "If someone comes after us, you run. I'll stay and bash his head open with my board."



Cul-de-sac, an expression of Catalan origin, translates literally to "butt of bag," but is used in French and Occitan (and, more recently, English) to refer to a dead end. Developers of planned suburban communities did not invent the cul-de-sac. Archeologists have unearthed similar constructions in ancient Greece. In his book *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, 15th century architect and planner Leon Battista Alberti ponders the function of such dead-end streets. He puts forth the theory that early city planners utilized cul-de-sacs as a form of defense. The dead end streets served as a means to confuse invading armies, allowing the residing military forces time to organize a defense.

The modern day cul-de-sac found in suburbia, along with the duplicate model homes, creates the same effect. I think, however, for different reasons. The memories of my two childhood homes in Menifee, California blur together. I sometimes recall looking out my backdoor in my first home to my backyard with a pool in my second home. I often forget which neighbors occupied the two cul-de-sacs we lived in. My eyes slid, and still slide, over the sameness of the rows of neatly spaced houses. Visitors, and sometimes residents, often complain of getting lost. The particular housing tracts I grew up in contained no more than six different home models. These models vary - only slightly - in shape and size, but display similar shades of paint and neatly trimmed lawns.

The uniformity is intoxicating—comforting. So much so that it’s hard to pay attention. Hard to look at a photograph of a row of homes and identify the street you’re looking at. “Everywhere looks the same,” we say. And this makes us lost.



I was ten years old in 1999. In that same year, 58,200 abductions perpetrated by a non-family member occurred throughout the country. On the surface, this number is cause for alarm. Around one out of every 1000 children in America experienced abduction by a non-family member. Sure, I’d bet against something with such odds every time. I would not, however, use my children as collateral for such a gamble. I wouldn’t take that chance. Such a number nearly justifies Mom’s and Dad’s fears.

But the term *non-family* doesn’t suggest what you might think it does. The U.S. Department of Justice uses the term in its most literal sense. To be abducted by a non-family member does not mean to be abducted by a complete stranger. The Department of Justice also uses the word abduction liberally. One of the 58,200 abductions reported in 1999 involved a babysitter refusing to let three children leave her house because the children’s parents owed her money for prior babysitting. In another case, a love sick ex-boyfriend detained his 17 year old ex-girlfriend for four hours in his car parked outside of a mall. In another case, a bus driver took a four-year-old boy for a twenty mile joyride. Abduction by someone known to the child accounted for 61% of reported cases. This, I found surprising, because—all my childhood—my community, in regards to kidnapping prevention, focused on *stranger danger*.

I can still see the Neighborhood Watch signs plastered all over my hometown. They look like a no smoking sign, except, instead of a cigarette, the sign features the silhouette of a trench-coat wearing man with his collar popped. His eyes peek out between the small slit in between his collar and triangular hat. He is the epitome of a *sbady* character. My school held informational assemblies about *stranger danger*. In one, they described a scenario in which a stranger could trick us in to getting into his car. Someone could drive up to us, tell us our parents experienced some kind of horrible accident and that they sent him or her to take us to the hospital. For situations like these, the informational assembly told us, we needed some kind of code word with

our parents. Some kind of password our parents would tell anyone they sent to pick us up. We watched a dramatization of someone approaching a child in a car. The stranger, wearing sunglasses and driving a convertible, gave the kid his spiel—his parents crashed their car, he needed to take him to the hospital. The kid asked for the password, the man said he didn’t have it, that his parents were unconscious. The kid runs away, successfully thwarting a non-family abduction.

These lessons were not limited to school assemblies. My family used to go tent camping somewhere along the Colorado River. We’d fish, swim, eat hamburgers—all that camping stuff. I used to bring a friend with me and, one day, on our way into the public shower, we saw a naked man dressing. We laughed and ran outside. He walked out, smile on his face, and said, “What’s the matter? We all look the same.” Once he was out of ear shot, my friend said, “That doesn’t mean I want to see your junk.” We were around ten years old at the time and we thought this was hilarious.

Once inside, I undressed into my bathing suit and hopped in one of the showers. After a while, I heard someone walk in. He walked up to my shower stall and asked if anyone was inside.

“Yes,” I said firmly.

“Can I come inside?” he asked in a strangely squeaky voice.

I tensed up. My heart began to race and I realized my friend had already left the building. I didn’t know what to do. I could barely summon my voice.

“No.”

“What? Let me in,” he persisted.

“No,” I said louder.

He started shaking on the door and I yelled, “Stop!”

“You’re an idiot.” The man’s voice had changed. Not squeaky anymore. He sounded like Dad. I opened the door to see him standing there.

“You’d have been as good as dead,” he said. “What have I told you about situations like this? You should have been screaming at the top of your lungs.”

Dad’s fears, though seemingly insane, were amplified by the crime notices my elementary school constantly handed out. Each one included some kind of police sketch accompanied by an incident report. I never saw an incident report that described a successful abduction. I remember one that explained that a man in a Toyota pick-up approached two young girls, offering

them a ride. Another that told of a man in a black Honda Civic with tinted windows driving by a girl several times on her walk home. I remember this report because it was the first time I came across the word “menacingly.” That’s the word the report used to describe his stare. He drove by, several times, staring menacingly.

In my adult years, I’ve driven to my old elementary school to pick up my youngest brother. It’s a small school, with a ton of kids, so you have to get to the school at least thirty minutes early for a spot on the curb. So I would park and wait for my brother and his friend to walk out to the street. I watched as children and mothers shuffled down the sidewalk and street. I watched closely, insuring my brother and his friend didn’t pass without a wave or honk from me.

At the time, I wore an unkempt beard and glasses. I had long hair and, I suppose, my appearance didn’t quite match the suburban aesthetic. I didn’t wear a trench coat or hat, but I might have fit the description of stranger. A few times, while waiting for my brother and his friend, I caught some stares from concerned mothers and fathers. One time, a white Chevy Suburban SUV pulled up next to me.

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“Excuse me,” a female voice said.

I had my window down but I didn’t think she was talking to me.

“Excuse me!” she said in a louder, more annoyed tone.

I rolled my window down further to poke my head out the window to look up at her from my four-door Nissan Sentra sedan.

“You know where you’re at, right?” She wore her blonde hair in a tight bun and a shirt that read, *Ask me about SOCCER!*

Not quite sure how to answer, I did so in the literal.

“Callie Kirkpatrick Elementary School?” I responded, clearly confused.

“Well,” she said, agitation characterizing her tone, “I’m here to pick up my kids.”

“Well,” I said, her agitation having worn off on me, “I’m here to pick up my little brother.”

I sat there, my head out the window, neck arched to stare up at her. She, with her window only half-way cracked, peered down at me speechless for what seemed like an inordinate amount of time. Eventually, since she was blocking traffic, a car behind her honked. She apologized and drove off. I had a hard time understanding our conversation until I realized that cars occupied

the curb spots all around me. She was simply looking for a space and thought that I was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I never talked to any of the kids walking by but, when I arrived too late to find a spot, I drove up and down the street the school was on, looking for my youngest brother. I don’t quite know how to stare menacingly—how to form the features of my face into menace—but I could imagine another interpreting my scanning as such. I could be the unknown male, in the grey Nissan, staring menacingly.

It’s strange to imagine myself a stranger in my own hometown. I wonder how many of these unknown males in the crime reports—how many of these potential abductors—lived, and even had children attending the school, in my hometown. I wonder if they read the reports, failed to notice themselves in the descriptions and drawings, and tucked away the incident in the back of their minds. Another outside force conspiring against their children.

I remember a time when Dad picked me up from school. On the way home, we saw a kid walking, sweat pouring out of him, on a typical Inland Empire 100 degree summer day. Dad rolled the passenger side window down, crept up to the kid on his left side, and—still slowly rolling forward—said, “You want a ride, man?”

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The kid, a few years older than me at the time, probably in his teens, stopped, looked at me sitting in the passenger seat, hesitated, and said, “No, thanks.”

“Come on,” my dad persisted, still rolling forward to match the kid’s pace. “It’s really hot out here, how much further do you have to go?”

“A couple miles” the kid responded.

“Get in,” my dad said, “I don’t mind going out of my way.”

The kid agreed, and I got out of the car, moving to the back seat. We dropped him off at his house without incident.

I still don’t know what to make of Dad’s actions on this day. I know, if I were the kid walking home, I’d have never accepted the ride—in fact, I may have ran to the nearest house, screaming and banging on the door as per Dad’s instructions. I suppose Dad picked up the kid that day because he knew he could trust himself. He knew that he was not the trench coated man depicted in the signs.



It would be disingenuous to call the paranoia surrounding stranger abduction completely fabricated. Or at least to blame the fabrication on my school or the residents of my home town. Fabrication might not be the right word. The media does not sensationalize the already sensational stories of stranger abduction. The ever blurring line between news and entertainment acts as the filter for what does and doesn't make the evening news.

In 2002, in Lake Elsinore—a city just a fifteen minute drive from where I lived—a man approached five-year-old Samantha Runion, asking if she'd seen his Chihuahua. She talked with him for a few moments when he suddenly grabbed and forced her into his car. The next day, a passerby discovered her body on the side of Highway 74.

The National Incident Study of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART) calls cases like these “stereotypical kidnappings.” A stereotypical kidnapping, according to the NISMART, is an “abduction perpetrated by a stranger or slight acquaintance and involving a child who was transported 50 or more miles, detained overnight, held for ransom or with the intent to keep the child permanently, or killed.” During 1999, of the 52,800 *non-family* abductions, the NISMART reported 115 stereotypical kidnappings. In 1999, stranger danger affected the lives of one out of every 600,000 children.



I have a hard time accepting some of the simpler explanations for suburbia's obsession with stranger danger. I don't think it's enough to say that the lives of suburbanites are so uneventful and comfortable that we need dangers with which to occupy ourselves. There may be some truth to this, but the simple need for danger does not fully explain the form this danger takes.

My brothers and I weren't allowed to leave our cul-de-sac, but sometimes kids ventured in from outside. One day, a kid named Scotty rode his bike over and joined us for a game of basketball. After, he told us that he had a trampoline in his backyard and that his parents said he could invite us over. I'd never been in his house before—his house outside the cul-de-sac—but my ten year old self couldn't resist. We strolled down to his house and jumped for an hour or two. After, we walked outside and got to the sidewalk to see Dad speed up to us in his car and slam on the brakes.

“Shane, Wesley,” his voice shook, “get in the car.”

My brother and I didn't understand. We got in, me in the front seat.

I looked over at Dad and asked, “What's wrong?”

He didn't respond. He stared straight ahead, his jaw moving as if he was grinding his teeth. I turned around in the seat and looked at my little brother, who shrugged at me. We drove the five hundred feet back to our house and followed Dad inside. He still wouldn't speak. Once inside, he took off his belt, spanked us both with it, and stormed upstairs. A few moments later, Mom crashed through the front door. Her eyes were puffy, obviously the result of tears.

“What were you guys thinking?” she asked, her hands running frantically through her hair.

We didn't know how to respond other than by saying we just wanted to jump on a trampoline. That Scotty was our friend.

“You know you're not allowed to leave our street,” she reminded us. “We had all of our neighbors driving all over town looking for you. You scared us to death.”



The sense of community created by the suburban aesthetic is just that—an aesthetic. The duplicate model homes (Scotty lived in the same model of home as I did); the neatly maintained parks where moms, sitting on separate benches, brought their kids to play; the annual Christmas light competition; the Neighborhood Watch signs. All of these things combine to create the illusion that we know each other—that, without any kind of first-hand interaction, we can see ourselves in our neighbors. Everything so ordered, so maintained—so watched after—that we can't imagine anyone around us being all that different. Our eyes slide over each other's homes and yards. We never stop to pause. Never stop to think about who lives behind the closely colored homes.

On February 25, 1996, in Hanford, CA, eleven-year-old Traci Rene Conrad walked to a house two blocks from hers on East Fargo Ave. She strolled by the beige colored model homes with red Spanish tile roofs and immaculate lawns on her way to visit a twelve-year-old playmate. She never returned home and, the next day, eighty police officers from surrounding areas canvased every

house within a one and a half mile radius. After talking to thousands of Hanford residents, police were no closer to finding the eleven-year-old girl. They searched backyards, garages, and—in some cases—the insides of neighboring houses. During an interview by a local news reporter, Ray Hawkins, a neighbor of the Conrads, said, “We’re all depressed and want to help in any way we can. But I really don’t think searching back yards is going to do much good. My gut feeling is that Rene is not around here anymore.”

Three weeks after Traci’s disappearance, police received a report concerning a strange odor emanating from a kiln in Traci’s playmate’s backyard. Upon arrival, police lifted the fifty pound lid of the kiln to find Traci’s decomposing body. A jury found the twelve year old playmate’s father, Kevin Galik, guilty of molesting and murdering the girl. After the news broke, a local reporter asked a sixty year old woman to comment.

“We thought we were moving to a nice, quiet, peaceful place,” she said. “It [Traci’s murder] has taught me to be more observant.”

I don’t bring this up to suggest we eye our neighbors—even everyone we come across—with extreme suspicion. I only mean to say that an aesthetic of order in our localities—of cleanliness, tidiness, and uniformity—dulls our view of our immediate surroundings so much that our attentions shift to the already blurred background. We shift our gazes to the more jagged landscapes we fled from—landscapes that changed without us. Landscapes we can’t fully understand. And this lack of understanding forms the basis of suburbia’s aesthetic. It is responsible for the misconception that tragedy only strikes in those less ordered, less pretty neighborhoods.

It may be unfair to say that every suburbanite chose the suburbs out of fear. I think I’m going to say it anyway. Fear is one emotional response to a lack of understanding. Every facet of the suburban experience is controlled and regulated. When my parents purchased our first house in Menifee, developers informed them that they’d have to pay a monthly fee to the Menifee Lakes Home Owners Association. The Home Owners Association tasked itself with maintaining the uniformity that characterizes my hometown—to send residents letters when they left their trash cans out; when they parked an oversized vehicle in their driveway or on the street; when they painted their house the wrong color; when they let their lawns go. They also plastered the town with the Neighborhood Watch signs. They gave the outside—the misunderstood—a face. And the understanding that we weren’t the rough edged

silhouette in the poster helped create the illusion of community.

So it’s not so strange to imagine myself a stranger in my hometown. While I grew up, Menifee was a small town and, yes, everyone knew each other. But only by name. Mom and Dad kept plenty of secrets from friends and neighbors. Their demeanor shifted whenever we had company. We wore different masks. Masks that advertised a commitment to traditional, all-American family values. Masks so bland, so generic, that anyone could wear them convincingly. The masks make us strangers to each other. Over time, we fail to differentiate between our masked and unmasked selves. Over time, we become strangers to ourselves.



The modern day cul-de-sac, no doubt, has its benefits. Growing up, the neighbor kids and I used to lay trash cans down at both ends of the cul-de-sac, strap on our roller-blades, and play street hockey. We used to build ramps for our bikes and set them up in the street, only having to move them when a neighbor drove in. On holidays like The Fourth of July, we ran wildly through the streets and our neighbors’ yards with our Super Soakers for our annual cul-de-sac water fight. One year, our fireman neighbor hooked up a hose to the fire hydrant and single-handedly defeated us all. None of this would have been possible on a street that experienced constant through traffic. I always attributed my parents’ preference for cul-de-sac living to the play space it creates for kids.

It wasn’t until I asked my parents why they had bought two houses in cul-de-sacs that I realized something else informed their preference. Not very unlike the ancient Greeks, my parents chose the cul-de-sac because of its ability to identify and confuse outsiders. Because of the lack of through traffic, they told me, they could easily ascertain whether or not a person or vehicle belonged. Such an assertion assumes that they, my parents, were always watching. It places the burden of my safety entirely on them and our immediate neighbors. I wonder what would have happened if, on the not-so-rare occasion that I was playing outside alone, the trench-coated man drove into my cul-de-sac and abducted me. I wonder if my parents, upon realizing I was gone, would have recognized that a bit of through traffic might have done me some good. Someone passing by could have intervened.