

Something's Up

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I'm not one to pry. But it's the middle of the night and there's a light shining from Edith's house next door. I'm up because I need to pee, like I always do. I look out my bathroom window and there it is, burning bright enough to arm a search party. Not from her porch or that fancy motion-detecting gizmo she installed last year. This is coming from one of the upstairs bedrooms, the one she keeps as her guest room.

Right away I know something's up. First of all, no one's supposed to have guests these days. And why would the light be on at 2:30AM? I pad down the hall for a better view from Sam's room. And that's when the light goes off, almost like someone knows I'm watching.

I stand in the dark for a while, spacing out, my hand running over Sam's letterman jacket draped over the headboard, fingering

the large G on the sleeve. I never did understand why he left it behind when he went off to Willamette. I guess he lost interest in football. I should get rid of it after all these years, but I don't. It still carries his smell.

I go back to bed but can't sleep. Maybe I should go check on Edith. We watch out for each other in this neighborhood. But I can hardly call at this hour. I consider going over in my slippers to poke around, but I won't be able to tell much from the outside.

I guess I eventually doze off because next thing I know it's 7:30. Damn! Edith will have already picked up her newspaper, so I can't accidentally-on-purpose go out for mine at the same time. I linger outside in case she appears, but no luck. Her house looks pretty much as it always does, with the living room curtains drawn; she hates

the sun to get on her furniture. I'm tempted to go through her side gate and see if she's in her kitchen but decide better of it. She won't like me snooping.

To tell the truth, we haven't been getting along so well recently. We used to pop over to each other's houses for coffee, hers on Tuesdays, mine on Fridays, but I had to put a stop to that. She talks a bunch of crazy stuff. And refuses to wear a mask. "It's just the flu," she says.

I do miss her. I miss my Pilates class, my hairdresser, the teller at the bank. I haven't touched another human being in ten months. I even miss the grouchy checker at Lucky's. Sam insisted on setting me up with Instacart—just about the only thing he's done for me this whole time. He stayed up in Oregon after college and never did visit much. I hate Instacart. The last two weeks I've had this gal who's clueless. I'm left with wilted lettuce and bananas that rot in a day.

I feel drained all morning and can't be bothered to log on for my Greek mythology class. It's a bit over my head anyways, but I might catch the recording later. For now, I just sit in my front room watching the world go by—what's left of it. I'm about to fix lunch when I spot action next door: a girl walking out and locking the deadbolt behind her.

I jump up, having the presence of mind to grab my watering can from the porch.

"Can I help you?" I say. Which is pretty dumb. She obviously isn't seeking assistance.

She stares at me for a moment, and then says, "I'm fine, thank you. Mrs. Spelman, isn't it?"

I can't figure out how she knows my name.

"It's Jeanie," she says. "I'm cat-sitting for Edith. Like I did last year, remember?"

"Oh, right," I say, though I don't. "Sorry..." She's wearing a baseball cap,

sunglasses, and a black mask, so I have a good excuse. I make a gesture over my own face as if to explain.

She laughs. "Oh, I know."

"Is Edith out of town?"

"She's gone to Florida. To see her sister."

Of course she has. We're told not to travel, but she thinks the rules don't apply to her.

"Have a good day," this Jeanie—or is it Jenny?—says, climbing into a beat-up blue car.

I figure I might as well water my azaleas and I'm just about done, when out the corner of my eye, I catch a movement: Edith's drapes. It's kind of creepy, to be honest. I go back indoors to my seat by the window.

Five minutes later Edith's door opens again, and a young man emerges: tall, thick black hair, handsome I suppose in a hardy sort of way, dressed in jeans, green parka, red bandana around his neck. He also locks the deadbolt—with his own key if you please—and quickly disappears around the corner.

Well! The cheek of her. Entertaining her fancy man on Edith's dime. Wait till Edith hears about this. Good thing I'm here to keep an eye out. I'll watch to see what happens tonight.

Well wouldn't you know it? I can't stay awake. I tell myself I'll take a quick nap and then stand guard in Sam's room, eyes peeled—but I sleep right through like a goddamn baby. First time in months. By the time I'm awake at six, all is quiet next door, same as always. But I'm on top of it now, back at my observation post in the front room.

And nothing happens. Of course, I can't sit here all day, but whenever I check, I see nothing. Nothing in the evening. And no more weird things with lights in the middle of the night either. All's quiet—suspiciously quiet if you ask me.

But the next day, I'm at my post and I see Mrs.... oh hell, what's her name? I can't think of it right now. Names swirl around my brain like it's made of liquid jello, with anything I'm trying to grab sinking to the bottom, out of reach. It'll come to me. She's from down the street, and here she's walking by, waving at me like she's in a parade. She's peering in my window, probably wants to know what I'm up to. For a moment I think I'll tell her about what's going on at Edith's and see what she makes of it, but she's

such a busy-body. She'd tell the whole neighborhood. There was that time I just happened to mention that Edith's daughter had gotten divorced, and it got back to Edith that I was the one who'd told her, and Edith didn't speak to me for a month. I think she's still mad at me.

Suddenly, there's action next door, someone coming out. That same gal I saw two days ago. I can't get a good look from this angle, but she's dragging a big black bag. It's on wheels but you can tell it's heavy by the way she's hauling it up the driveway and lifting it into her car. Oh Lordy...maybe it's a body. That's why she's been so sneaky. Suppose that's Edith, she isn't in Florida at all, she's in that bag, they've murdered her and she's taking the body to the dump.

Sam thinks I'm obsessed with murder mysteries. I do like them. On the TV, I mean. I watch the same shows over and over. Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple are my favorites. You'd think I would remember who dunnit from one time to the next, but I always forget. I like seeing the same characters. They keep me company.

I suddenly recall that Edith keeps a spare key under a geranium pot in her backyard. At least she used to. I could go over while the gal is out, let myself in, and check things out. Maybe I'm getting myself in a state over nothing, but it would put my mind at ease. If something fishy is going on, wouldn't be right for me to ignore it. Edith and I are good friends—at least we used to be. I suppose we're not *close* close, but you can't live next door to someone for forty years and sit by and do nothing.

I scamper around the side of her house, checking to make sure Mrs. Mitchell—that's her name, told you it would come to me—make sure she isn't walking by again, and I find the key under the pot by the back door. It's in a small plastic bottle with a screw top, damp and rusty from the elements. For a moment I think I'm never going to open it with these arthritic hands of mine. But I stretch my fingers and rub them together to warm them and give it another go, and *there*, the lid creeks open and the key plops into my palm.

But the door won't unlock. I jiggle the key and try pushing and pulling, but it won't budge. Her back door has those small square panes of glass, and a white lacey curtain so I can't see inside. Then

it occurs to me: I could smash through the pane closest to the lock and reach in to open it. I'm not exactly in the habit of doing this sort of thing, but I owe it to Edith.

I see a broken pot under her deck, along with an overturned rusty lawn chair. Turns out, it's a lot harder than you think to smash a window. The pot doesn't do the trick, so I resort to the leg of the lawn chair, and that works, but boy, it makes a lot of noise, and I'm terrified someone will hear me. Then I have all the jagged glass to work around. I finally get myself into the kitchen, step carefully over the broken glass on the floor, and survey the scene.

Everything seems spick and span inside. There's a stack of mail and a vase with fresh flowers on the counter and a long note written on yellow lined paper. *Welcome Home!* it says at the top in fancy lettering decorated with colored squirls and squiggles. "*Willamena will be happy to see you. She probably won't admit that she slept on the bed with me the past two nights. Ha ha!*" And on and on it goes, Willamena this and Willamena that.

I'm trying to take this in and wondering what to do next, when I hear someone at the front door, down at the far end of the hall, letting themselves in with a key. Yikes! Must be the girl returning or *damn*, maybe the boyfriend. I grab a knife from the block on the counter, and duck for cover. And then I hear a meowing and purring and...*what?* It's Edith's voice, saying, "Hi Sweetie, I'm home," and I think *Oh my God, what the hell am I doing?*

Somehow, I manage to get myself out of there. I retreat out the back door and creep along the side of her house in a crouching position that does a number on my knees. I get home and collapse onto the couch, my heart pounding. I realize I don't know what I did with the knife, and *shoot*, I should have wiped my fingerprints off the backdoor. What a mess.

At least I know Edith is okay. Good to know everything is in order, and Willamena was well cared for. But my legs are still jittery from the excitement. I can't let Sam know about this. He would go nuts. Never mind Edith. Oh Lordy, here she comes now, walking up my steps. She'll want to know if I heard anyone breaking in. I'll deny all knowledge, of course, say I never heard a thing. But I'll open the door and stand under the awning, me with my mask on, her six feet away, and maybe we'll have a good chat. Just like old times. □