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SPARK

Jennifer A. Howard

The afternoon Laura ended up in bed with the door-to-door umbrella salesman, her basement was flooding. She was standing at the top of the stairs, but she could hear her TV in the living room. Laura thought, Perhaps I need to put on some rubber boots and go down there and do something.

But she didn't know what she should do once she was there. There was a water heater and a furnace and other things that plugged into the wall. There were fuses. She was sure she would be electrocuted for trying. A talk show was on, and she listened in case it would help her, but the topic was adult children who fail to ever move out of their parents' houses, and that wasn't what her day was about at all.

The doorbell rang. Outside it was raining, so, on her way to the door, she grabbed a dish towel to wrap around the brass doorknob. Laura's great-great-great-grandfather had been the first white man in Michigan to be killed by lightning. And on the other side—her mother's—a great-grandmother was also struck dead, standing at the kitchen sink, washing dishes in front of her two small children when the lightning stole right through the open window in front of her.

Given this history in her blood, Laura not only avoided tall trees during rainstorms, she refused to understand electricity altogether. She didn't own a blowdryer or a toaster, and she made popcorn on her gas stove. Her garage door needed to be lifted open, and her vibrator was battery-powered because she refused to connect her body to a wall socket. The TV had been on, sometimes loud, sometimes muted, since the day it was delivered.

When she answered the door, she found a man with a shiny gray coat who carried a sack of umbrellas over his shoulder but had not opened a single one of them against the rain. He was soaked. Laura motioned for him to come in. When he stepped through the door, little drops of rain rolled like mercury onto her carpet and then disappeared.

She told him she didn't normally invite strangers inside but that her basement was right this second flooding. She asked him if he knew what to do.

Flooding? he said, and looked back over his shoulder to the sky. I guess we should bail. So she got buckets from the garage and gave one to him, and she stood at the top of the stairs while he scooped one full of water and carried it up. She traded him an empty bucket for the full one and carried it outside and threw dirty water onto the already wet lawn.

While they were working, Laura asked the man if he usually sold in the rain, if that was better for business. He answered that no, he had been caught by surprise by the weather. He said umbrellas actually sold better in the sunshine, when people misremembered rain as less messy than it really is. When it is not raining, he said, people imagine rain falling down orderly and perpendicular as if from a pencil-sketched cloud over a boy in a sour mood. Real rain gets around whatever you hold over your head. It finds you.

But still, he said, that's no reason to not own an umbrella.

After they cleared out the water and mopped the floor, the man plugged the sump pump back in. Laura watched him do it. His feet were wet, as were the bottom six inches of his pant legs, and still he took the cord and plugged it into the socket without flinching. He was the bravest man she had ever met, so when he started to walk up the stairs, she didn't move out of his way. In fact she stepped down one or two steps to meet him, and he didn't even look confused that she might want him to kiss her. He did, his hands coming to land at first on the back of her knees. As she was leading him through the kitchen and into her bedroom, she did wonder how it was that she was about to sleep with a man whose profession was quite so dangerous. A man who held over his head a long metal stick protected only by the flimsiest layer of nylon.

From the bed, she could still hear the TV in the living room. The weatherman was saying, And that's what causing our unpredictable... He stopped at his choice of words. Well, it's

predictable, of course, he said, because knowing the future was his job. But variable, very variable weather.

Laura's feet tangled in blankets shoved to the foot of the bed, and her hand moved up the man's back to settle on his neck while he kissed her. When the thin hair on the umbrella salesman's head began to whisper with static, she thought to let go. Her whole body began to pull itself away from him, but she remembered his bravery. She kept her one hand firm against his skin, traced with electricity, and she reached her other hand long above her head. She flattened her palm, she lengthened her fingers, and she pressed her hand, connected to everything about her, against the wooden headboard to ground herself.