

BASIL, LEMONS, AND BLOOD

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The break-ins started at the end of March. Snow gave way to mud that should have preserved the intruder's tracks. Everyone heard him. No one saw him. Our neighbors' jewelry and televisions vanished into the ether. I lay awake with my nose buried in my sleeping husband's neck, smelling cedar and seeing the intruder's future entrance, the crack at our front door when he split the lock, my husband subduing him with clenched fists.

One night in bed my husband's throat shifted. His eyes opened. His chin shook. The other economics professor had reported to work late that afternoon with a slashed cheek and a wired-shut jaw. He awoke the night before to the rustling noise of the intruder searching his kitchen cabinets. The umbrella he snatched from his bedroom closet landed uselessly on the intruder's cheek. I shrank into myself at the news, crunched up my arms and legs, let my thoughts turn black.

My husband refused to buy a gun. He believed in our security system and door locks. He won battles with reason and logic, not brute force. The intruder robbed his way through town toward our house. The night air grew warm and damp. I awoke trembling from dreams where my husband failed to deter the intruder with graphs, charts, chalked-up blackboard numbers. My exhaustion populated our bedroom with intruders, masked and not, poised to strike, already leaning over our bed, one hand on my throat.

After pleading proved fruitless I turned the change in our coffee tin into bills and met a man on a farm road twenty miles from town to jam cash in his hand and accept a paper bag that I cradled like a baby on the

way back to my car. I hunched below dashboard level so no one could see me peek at what I'd bought. I put the gun on my left palm and resisted both urges: to throw it out the window, to puke. I put it on my right palm. I could breathe. I could shoot. All I had to do was aim and pull the trigger. I ran my tongue up the barrel and felt the cool certainty of a plan spreading across my fingers, leaking into my chest.

At home I put the gun in a dumped-out bag of flour and watched its plastic fade behind a layer of flour dust that rose up like smoke. My husband said he saw something new in my face. I pretended my newfound gun-owning confidence was an extra layer of mascara. He never said why his default cedar scent had started to fade into basil.

I waited seven days to move a rocking chair from the living room to our wrap-around porch and another three to sit facing the woods once a week from sunset to sunrise with the gun in my right dress pocket. On the first night's watch, the whippoorwills hurled their call from my left ear to my right and every pair of leaves brushing against each other became someone tiptoeing up to me. My husband yelled through the window that I should come inside and go to bed for the first couple of hours. After that I ignored his snoring.

I spent two nights a week on the porch. Three. The night noises shifted toward static from threat. The gun shed some of its psychic weight and became a natural extension of my arm. Maple and birch leaves turned from yellow to forest green and grew dense enough to obscure what slid between tree trunks in the dark. The woods embraced spring. My husband shrank from it. He padded outside in his slippers and stroked my hair each morning instead of taking a shift on the watch. When I didn't move he gave me a disdainful head shake and then a sigh. He graded papers in his office and started sleeping there more often than not. I smelled more basil on his neck, his chest, his hair. Our secrets soured our milk and wilted our greens, making dinners insufferable affairs better conducted alone. I tucked beef jerky in my left dress pocket instead of wasting time with food that required plates.

The intruder advanced one ranch closer to us every night. I spent all my nights outside. In late April I added a pair of binoculars to my porch

kit. In the first week of May I aimed them between the trees and caught a man swaying in circles, his skinny legs slow-dancing in the dark. Every cell in my body stood at attention. I put my hand on the gun and dug my feet down into the porch planks. His footsteps came in over the wind. I stood and aimed. He refused to move beyond the tree line. I sat and waited. I eyed him again. He'd lost his human form and become a half-downed tree branch two-stepping with the breeze.

That night the intruder robbed no one, but for the next three nights he hit two houses apiece, a schedule that meant he'd come to see me on night four.

I shed my cardigan to spend the night's watch in one of my absent husband's tight white ribbed undershirts with my hair pulled back, the best male costume I could construct on short notice. The sky turned orange, then pink, then blue. Every tree branch grew human arms, each shadow a loping stride. When the porch creaked, footsteps crept up behind my chair that dissipated when I turned my head. The wind detonated through my ears.

Just before sunrise the intruder rose from the forest to approach the porch. When he cleared the tree line a light burst into my throat that I choked down like cough syrup in order to focus. He walked. I stood and aimed. For one long second before I fired, our movements matched. His arms floated up and in front like mine. His stride widened to match my standing stance. He took the step that forced us to come together. I closed my eyes and squeezed my finger. The shot that linked us sounded like the world's loudest slammed door. I ran behind my house. My whole body vibrated with the shot's dying echo.

When the volume returned to normal my binoculars revealed a man lying face-down in the dirt. I stroked the cell phone resting in my left dress pocket, ready to pull it out and dial 911, but I didn't. He stayed down for a safe amount of time. I walked over to see whom I'd hit. He smelled like basil, lemons, and blood. A pink smear of blush marred his shirt pocket. I dropped to my knees in the dirt, found his pulse and exhaled until my lungs burned. But when the ambulance arrived, the blush stain kept me from jumping in back. No one's things disappeared that night. Yet I didn't feel

any safer.

I have moved my standoff from the porch to my bed, where I lie with my back to him on the rare nights he's there. His right arm is wrapped in a sling that he rubs against the sheets as if doing so will start a fire. His right pointer and middle fingers, both broken, are tied to plastic splints that he taps on the bed frame to keep me awake. I find it more useful to address him with silence than words. He returns the favor when he comes home instead of staying with the baker's daughter, who puts basil in her breads, lemon in her tarts, and something bitter in the wind that floats from her bakery to our house.