

Fern

Melissa Woods

The homes in my neighborhood exude a bland newness. There are several color schemes available, from powdery blue to buttercup-yellow to sepia, all with an eggshell colored trim. Most people, apparently, prefer muted colors, order and symmetry. Fern's house has three bedrooms, two baths, and a granite island with the burners in the center. I'm sure she complains about it. It's a terrible design. Why have an island when you can't chop vegetables on it? Her backyard is a rectangular shape, the same square-footage of every house on the street—which is to say, small. I should know. We both have model C.

But unlike mine, Fern's backyard is not lacking in character. It breaks the homeowner's association rules so outlandishly that they leave her alone, afraid of unleashing some witchy powers Fern might possess. The macabre, the wildness, the defiance of natural law—it inspires a certain wonder. The unsettled nature of it is less disturbing than the yards as green as artificial turf. Plastic blades of grass chill me to the bone.

From my upstairs window, I have an almost panoramic view of Fern's yard. There is thick, tangled brush, with weeds as tall and spiky as stalks of corn, waving to and fro. The air has a very particular odor, a mixture of pine-infused saltwater, and the putrid, soggy landscape that is Fern's backyard. Dandelions sprout straight into the air, gasping for breath amid the strangled web of plant species. There is a thin winding path flanked on either side by the weeds, like a neatly cut maze. Fern walks through it, dead grasses whipping at her sides, each evening at eleven p.m.

All I have heard is the swish of her body, the soft padding of her steps, the howl of the wind. She does this even in thunderstorms. Rain plunks against metal and concrete, drips onto plants, and splats onto rooftops. It rolls down trellises, trickles through mud, and snakes into streams, creating its own rhythmic beat. Fern's presence never fades; she is wispy and intangible, but her essence is always there. The neighbors say she walks barefoot, unafraid of slicing her flesh with a bur, or a sharp, dead weed. She isn't worried about puncturing her foot on a tetanus-infected nail. Nor is she concerned about rats burrowing in the detritus, as can happen in unkempt grass in Washington. The thought makes me shudder.

They say she has never once yelped, though I cannot attest to this. I have lived here less than a month. I am a scientist, a psychiatrist bound to confidentiality, accustomed to keeping secrets. Humans have strangely textured levels of resilience—some of us have higher thresholds for stress than others—though our thought patterns and responses to trauma are quite predictable. I rely only on what the studies have told me, which is that none of us are particularly unique. Fern, in my professional opinion, is an anomaly.

I know of only facts—back there is a lemon tree, and its fruit is so richly yellow, it is almost incandescent against the gray sky. Lemons do not flourish in the Pacific Northwest. Citrus fruit requires direct sunlight to grow. I find this curious, naturally, how Fern manages to keep this tree alive when she can't mow her lawn. Surrounding the tree, is a circular patch of youthful grass, its blades tiny and new and green.

In the midst of this, is the gravestone.

As much as I refuse to participate in gossip, I must admit to a curiosity about the marker. Fern's wife died in a car accident two winters ago; this is verifiable. The neighbors say her wife

is buried in the backyard, beneath this brilliant tree. Normally, I would scoff at this. My husband and I would laugh. Impossible, he'd say. They have laws against this stuff.

Now, with no partner to joke with, and no career to speak of, I have nothing but time. Watching Fern has become an obsession.

I got an incredible deal on the house, thanks to Fern's mini-forest, the otherworldly lemon tree, and the dead body beneath it. And so, I am isolated as she is, the neighbors too distant to know about my own tortured evenings. My lawn is manicured and neat, except for the white cabana, where I smoke Camel lights and drink white wine till sunrise, pacing the cold cement littered with soggy cigarette butts. On stormy nights, I light the fire pit and circle the crackling flames, the scent of charred wood wafting to my nose. I smash the wine glasses to bits as the anger and pain claw at my chest. It is explosive. All consuming. But I find softness in violence, poetry in disquiet. There is beauty in brokenness, in shattered crystal, in the fragments of glass as they catch luminous red and gold hues like tiny mirrors. Destruction of loveliness is comforting. Or maybe it is a way of grasping at something I can control—I can throw wine glasses.

I cannot bring Andrew back.

This is what I would say, if I could diagnose myself. I suppose I shouldn't, because I don't work anymore.

I am exhausted and alone in this sad little house, where I have no family, and my co-workers have gone mute. What is there to say to a psychiatrist whose husband commits suicide? They don't want to hear about it anymore, because they are well-aware their condolences have become redundant. They stick to the tongue.

Except, with her yard merely feet away, Fern hears. She must. But she says nothing. I am awed by her restraint, the discretion of her own madness. I watch her nightly trip through the brambles, hunched low in my bedroom, my chin resting on the window sill, a goblet of Merlot in my hand. Her wife's headstone is adorned with inlaid rubies and sapphires. The jewels glimmer, even in the dark, as if they belong in a Renaissance painting. She kneels on the grass and whispers into the air. I cannot read her lips from this distance, but I imagine she says, *I love you*. The sight does not strike me as disturbing or morbid. Fern's wife is under the lemon tree, and the grave is all Fern has left of her. It makes sense.

I know I am peeking in on an intimate moment, where the urge to watch is only slightly stronger than the one to look away. Fern is resplendent, glowing. Her skirt spreads around her like a carefully arranged wedding gown, ready for the photographer to preserve. Her hair falls down her back, bare shoulders pale, with her shadow stretched across the dewy grass. She kisses her fingers and presses them to the stone.

Mine, you are mine, and we will never be apart. Probably, this is what she says as she stands and sashays through the winding labyrinth and back into the house. The light switches off. Fern sleeps. What does she dream of? I am impressed by the neatness of her grief, how she steps through the messiness and arrives at the grave unscathed, and she returns to the cookie-cutter house, and slips into bed. I don't know every facet of Fern's story, other than the fact it exists. And that she is waist-deep in it, but it cannot not touch her. She has carved a soft path through the tangles. It seems impossible, but as I said, Fern is an anomaly.

I do not sleep. My eyes are swallowed by dark, puffy flesh. It hurts to breathe. This house is so quiet. When I bought it, I thought its newness would be soothing. Andrew and I had lived in a large, Victorian-style home, painted an eggplant color, with white shutters and a wood deck we

installed together. He expanded our walk-in closet to fit my extensive collection of shoes. I have found, through the years, that patients often gaze at the floor, their eyes focusing on the clinician's feet. Andrew laughed when I explained that the shoes were to give my patients something pleasant to look at.

My thoughts are racing again. I write the symptoms down. Insomnia, bizarre ruminations, survivor's guilt, compulsive spying....

I had found him hanging, the noose positioned directly over my shoes. What psychiatrist doesn't notice her husband has lost his mind? What could have been done? Something, something, something. I don't have a reason, and I desperately need one. *Andrew, the least you could have done is leave a note.* Everything was fine, on the surface. *But oh, so much is buried with you, love. It seems crazy to wonder, but I do: why did you die on my shoes?* I think, sometimes, when the night is black and I am alone, so deeply alone, that he killed himself in the closet to spite me. Rage wells in my stomach like lava, threatening to spill out, but I swallow it down, letting it burn like whiskey. No, of course he did not. What a terrible thought. I am astonished by my selfishness. *God, Julia this is not about you!* The man was in agony. He must have been. And I did nothing.

I pour myself another shot.

Sometime around three a.m., I make brownies. I'm no baker, but the instructions are simple enough. Oil, eggs, water, and the pouch of chocolate. The ease of mixing, pouring, baking—it is almost mathematical. I may never participate in a double-blind study again, but I can measure with precision. Once they cool, I cut them into neat squares and arrange them on a platter. Pleased, I tuck aluminum foil around the edges.

In the morning, I wake with a throbbing headache. My mouth is parched and tastes like vomit. I shut my eyes tightly, hoping to stop the spinning. Good god, I feel like death; sometimes I wish for death in these damp hungover mornings, where the briny ocean air cuts my lungs. Instead, I rummage through the bedside table for Tylenol and choke them down with a glass of water.

Head swimming, I remember the brownies. Maybe I can catch her before she walks the dog. I splash my face with water and brush my fuzzy teeth, trying not to gag on the minty toothpaste. With the platter balanced in one arm, I walk the short distance to her door. The front yard is oddly well-kept, with a pot of geraniums on the porch. I practice my smile and ring the bell, heart thumping in my stomach.

The door swings open. Fern stands before me, arms crossed over her chest. I note her suspicion; my career depends on reading body language. She raises her eyebrows. “Can I help you?”

“I’m your new neighbor. My name is Julia Benson,” I say, and clear my throat. “I made brownies, but I can come back if I’m disturbing you.”

After a brief pause, she says, “You’re not with the homeowner’s association?”

“No,” I say, with a weary sigh, and present the brownies. Food is the universal peace sign.

Fern takes them. “All right. Come in, then.” She uncurls the foil and sniffs. “They look great.”

It is early in the morning, and she is dressed for the day. She waves me into the kitchen, where there are no dishes in the sink, no empty bottles of alcohol. The rich wooden floors gleam

and the island and counters are scrubbed. The contrast between Fern's home and her backyard is stark. This mystery must be solved.

"Have a seat," she says, indicating toward the bar stool.

I slump in the chair and rub my temples. "I don't know anyone in the area. And we're neighbors, so I thought I'd stop by."

Fern watches me curiously. "Is something the matter?"

"No," I say, trying to steady the reedy pitch to my voice. "It's nothing." A wave of embarrassment rushes through me, when I realize there is no reasonable explanation for the visit. I fluff my hair and stand, feeling very dizzy.

"Are you sure?" She bites her lip, as if she has more to say.

I walk briskly to the door before she gets the chance. "Yes. I just wanted to drop off the brownies."

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Andrew's grave—the part with our wedding date carved into the granite—is etched with calcium deposits. At first, I thought it was my imagination, but the cemetery assures me this is normal, that there is a sort of upkeep needed, instructions I missed during the surreal moment of funeral planning.

"It's because of the salt in the air. The ocean. It's not so bad, Ms. Benson," she says. "We can fix it right up."

"Dr. Benson," I say.

"What?"

I swallow hard. "My name is Dr. Benson. Or Julia."

I end the call, hands shaky and cold. He would have been cared for, if he'd been home. Like Fern's wife. Instead, I left him to fall into disrepair, right at sea level. Three miles away.

Oh, Andrew. I deserved the shoe metaphor.

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It is a cold, clear night, where stars and moonlight illuminate the cemetery. My hands are chafed and smell like iron from climbing the fence. The truck rumbles just on the other side of it. I hadn't considered that the cemetery would be locked at closing time. Numbness spreads through my body; blood creeps through my veins so slowly I can feel it clotting. I kneel in the damp earth, under a maple tree, where the stone is dappled with starlight poking through the leaves, morphing into nebulous shapes that shift with the angle of the wind. I scrape off a bit of foamy lichen sprouting at the beveled edge, focusing on the imperfection nature has bestowed upon it. I think of Andrew beneath the ground, and dig my knees deeper into the wet grass, thinking that perhaps a molecule of him could touch me out in the dark, dark night. Maybe a fragment of bone is under a rock, a chip of his tooth just beneath the surface.

I am only allowed to see him during visiting hours.

I smash the shovel into the ground, my muscles burning with heat. Metal pierces sod and cuts into the earth, and the soil sighs under the weight of it, the disruption releasing trapped air. The sound is such a relief, like a swollen blister pricked by a needle, the hot liquid oozing out of it. I rest my head on the dewy grass, cooling my sweaty cheek, stretching my arms out in front of me. Child's pose. People say that children need to learn to self-soothe. As a doctor, and now a widow, I believe the opposite is true. When crushed by devastation, we revert to childhood; we borrow self-soothing from them.

The trees dance, shaking their leaves to the low growl of the guttural wind, like a percussion instrument. I gaze at the small hole I have dug, and I feel preposterous, insane. With a heavy sigh, I crawl toward it and pour handfuls of soil back into the little indentation.

A car rumbles on the other side of the fence. I scramble up from the ground. There is nowhere to run. The vehicle is right beside my truck, headlights illuminating the cemetery. Shit. I'm going to jail or a mental hospital. Grave-digging is illegal. I'll lose my medical license. This break from work will be permanent. Tears roll down my cheeks. It's official; I've lost everything.

The car door swings open and a body approaches the fence. I am frozen, my mind reeling. Resisting the urge to shut my eyes, I wait. It's probably the police, though there are no sirens. Not yet.

"Julia?" The body grows closer.

"Who is it?"

"Dr. Benson?"

Oh God, it's the cemetery people. There's nothing logical I have to say, so I say nothing.

The figure reaches the gate and calls my name again. I watch her fingers curl around the iron bars, a mere silhouette in the headlights, but I recognize her from all the times I spied on her.

It is Fern.

I amble toward the gate, silent and nearly delirious, unsure if what I see is real. The susurrus of wind and trees and leaves flutter around me; the scent of raw earth mixed with salt drifting from a nearby inlet assaults me. My mind is so bright, a kaleidoscope of colors floating around in the blackness.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I say.

She laughs. “The bigger question is, why are you? It’s late and this place is closed. You took off from your garage, tires squealing.”

“You followed me?” I say, mildly offended.

Her eyes flicker; she twists her lips. “The same could be said of you. Every night, I see you watching me from the window.”

“Then what’s your problem? You and I are no different.” I shiver in the cold.

“I’m not breaking into a cemetery in the middle of the night,” she points out. “This is illegal. And strange.”

I shift my feet. Who is Fern to speak of legality and strangeness?

“Ah, I see.” She smiles sadly. “You listen to the rumors. Megan is not buried in my yard. That would be against every city ordinance they’ve got. You can’t even bury your dog outside in this area. I suppose I thought you were more logical than that.”

My cheeks burn. “Then what is the headstone?”

“It’s a place to visit,” she replies. “A place to wander to, to talk. Her body is not there. We scattered her ashes into the ocean.”

I nod and take a deep breath.

“Your husband is not there, you know. That’s the problem with doctor-types. Everything is so physical, so tangible. The rules are unbending.”

“I like to know what’s coming.”

“But you didn’t,” Fern says. “You didn’t know what was coming.” She swallows. “I didn’t either.”

Tears burn my eyes. “No. And this piece, this marker. It is all that is left of him.”

Fern takes a breath. A pause settles between us, and I resist the urge to fill it. “I can understand that,” she says.

“What do I do?” I say to this strange woman who lives next door, with the jungle in her backyard.

“Well,” she says, thinking, “you ought to go back to your car. There was no need to climb that fence.” She points to an open pocket beside a pine tree.

“Pragmatic,” I say.

“Then,” she continues, “you should drive home and shower. Once all that mud is off of you, we ought to eat the brownies.”

Dumbly, I follow, and duck behind the sappy pine tree. I slip between a human-sized space and head to my car. This is all so surreal. My eyes graze my jeans, which are caked with mud.

“Can you drive?” she says, catching up to me, breathless.

Her cheeks are red from the cold. She pulls her thin sweater around herself. Fern. The woman with a grave in her yard, has followed me to a cemetery at midnight. I blink a few times. “I’m fine. I’ll come over for brownies. We’re neighbors, after all.” I climb in the truck, straight in my seat, and grip the steering wheel at ten and two.

“All right then.” She turns and drifts toward her car, skirt flapping and sticking to her legs in the wind. I imagine Fern stepping toward Megan’s monument, with sharp stalks of weed all around her. Shoeless, fearless.

They say the only way out is through.