

The Girl in the Yard

by *Brandon Bell*

Rye woke at a diagonal, legs aching not from work or exercise, but sleep, how thrilled he was to be thirty. He unkinked himself from the sheets and started his Sunday routine more leisurely than normal since Erin, his wife, had taken their son to her parents' house for the week. Heading downstairs to the bathroom, Rye passed the landing window, in which white flesh scraped the corner of his eye. Three steps later, he doubled back to the window to look at the naked girl asleep in his yard.

Face pressed to the glass he took in the girl's gleaming white side, left leg kicked like a baseball pitcher winding up. It was Sam, teenage daughter of the Elders, across-the-street neighbors with silver hair to whom Rye could relate only when exhausted. When her ribs expanded, he realized she could've been dead, dumped in the yard raped and strangled.

"Bitch," he said of Erin. She was three hundred miles away, leaving him to deal with this mess. He ran downstairs, tightening the belt of his robe until it dug into his soft sides. In the living room he stalled at a window view of the girl's breasts. Moral duty spun him from this sight, primal awakening nipped by feigned disgust.

"Jesus H., Erin," he said, pedaling into the pink summer morning. Instead of going to the girl, he went next door, home of Helen Smutz. The widow answered Rye's knock with a frown on her sun-leathered face.

"What?" she asked. Always a delight.

Rye, a nail biter, fought the urge to gnaw his fingers by curling his hands as if he had cerebral palsy. "Can you get my back on something?" he said, hoping to sound young, as he saw himself. "But you gotta keep it hush, feel me?"

Helen smiled at this invitation to conspire. "What can I do to help?" she said, opening the door all the way.

"There's a girl," he nodded toward his yard, whispering, "the Elders' little one? She passed out in my yard. But hold up—she's kind of in like a casual state. I had nothing to do with it. I don't even know why she's there, I swear."

"She's in her skivvies?"

"Yeah, but worse. She's butt-assed naked, if you follow."

"Doesn't surprise me much. I told Ellen she had no business getting pregnant, old as she was. She and Mitch can't stay up later than eight without nodding off. You should thank god she graduates this year. Raising a little man ain't easy when there's a delinquent running around all hours with her ass hanging out. If your boy asks for a telescope, you better believe the moon in the sky ain't the one he'll be using it to watch."

"Alright, I think—"

"He'll use it to ogle little missy's booby parts."

Rye couldn't fight off his fingers any longer. He ripped at his thumb, speaking with a splinter of nail floating in his gums: "Yeah, alright, but I really need you to help me on this."

A blistering smile fell over her face. "Of course, dear," she said, shoving Rye toward home. "Let me handle it. Don't you let this fester even a second in your head."

He ran home, first stop: toilet. Lifting the lid, taking aim he caved to one last peek at Sam. But when he reached the window, Helen was leading her out of the yard. He could only see their ankles, for a plaid comforter covered them both like nomads of another world hiding from the sun.

He neglected yard work for online porn and cold showers. Neither cleaned his head of the girl. Taking care not to gawk at her body had left him to wallow in felonious imagination. He would never act on such thoughts; he simply hated his wiring for making him want to, and for making him so different from Erin. His wife believed in an invisible hand of love that guided kindred spirits to one another. Fly open in front of the computer, the hand of lust ruled over love. For why else would Rye blow an entire day emptying himself into wads of toilet paper.

He slept on the couch in case she returned. And she did, a sight through cracked blinds, naked on her back, palms skyward in the mercy position. Plastered to the window, he tested himself to look no lower than her chin, proudly blurring her shape in the edge of his vision. Until he heard the banging of garbage men tossing trashcans. Her body was shielded from the street by only a neat row of hedges. In minutes the gruff men would rattle up and devour her. Dressed in yesterday's clothes, Rye grabbed a blanket from the couch and set out to save her. Holding the blanket as a privacy curtain, he tracked his forward movement by watching his feet shish through the grass. For a second he looked out for the garbage men, a distraction that

ended in tripping on the girl's ankle. Their twisted bodies and the blanket set the scene of a profane picnic.

"I didn't see anything," he assured her, blindly giving her the blanket. Her shower chemical scent sent Rye out of his head. After she wrapped herself, he permitted himself a peek: the blanket opened at her feet like the ruffled skirt of a Christmas tree, and the freckles on her shoulders begged his fingertips to connect them. "What do you think you're doing?" he snapped, quashing his illegal hunger with unsustainable authority. As with Oliver, he felt self-conscious when disciplining, like a sellout to the kids. He

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turned good cop: "Are you okay? How's your dad? Helen thinks he can't keep up."

"I, um—"

"Nope, fuck it. No sweat.

Keep the blanket." He clamored home, humiliated by his age. For an hour he paced the living room, trying to slow his heart, monitoring the now empty patch of grass. He needed to go to work, but

would never survive eight hours chained to a desk, not after his brush with Sam.

I crave excitement, he told himself, *I need mystery*.

He was horny.

Unable to fake a sore throat, he emailed-in sick to work. He remained at the computer to create a Facebook account. The frustrating "find friends" search pulled up unending pages of Sam Elders, most of them guys a thousand miles away. When he finally clicked a thumbnail for a Sam that could've been the girl in the yard, he was greeted by a blockade page that pretty much said: "Sam must grant you permission to spy on her." He pounded the desk, cursing CNN for overselling Facebook's lax privacy standards.

Conceding that electronic stalking wasn't for him, he decided to take the old-fashioned approach and stalk women in real life. Off to the grocery he went, in search of lonely housewives, ready to fill the extramarital void left by the disappearance of milkmen. Although it was a workday morning, the grocery was packed. He had to park by the far away marquee that announced second-run movies shown at the adjacent discount cinema. *Avatar* (No 3-D). *New Moon*. Passing through the automatic door, he scored a smile from a woman with broad hips and a soft stomach. When her pace slowed, his feet stuttered, unsure if he should stop until she did.

"Hey girl," he said, the best he could do.

"It's Denise, Erin's friend?" she said.

Sbit. He tried to wipe away his lecherous grin, but it was too late.

Loudly she gulped back an accusation: Tiger Woods, out trolling. "What're you doing, out shopping?" he asked.

She nodded, stabbed, "How's Erin?"

"Fantastic. Oh yeah. We should have you over some time."

"Okay, maybe. I'll give her a call."

"Great. I hope you do." He would have to craft a defense for Denise's forthcoming accusations, but that would come another day. He retrieved a prop shopping cart and pushed it into the store, continuing his search, weaving around elderly men and women and randomly entering the frozen food aisle. *Baby, you're so hot, you might melt all this stuff*. Gray-topped geriatrics clogged the floor with slow stuffed carts. He soon learned why.

"Remember shoppers," announced the overhead speaker, "today is senior citizen's day. Everyone over sixty-five gets five-percent off."

Son of a bitch. The store was crawling with old people. Rye was the only person too young to qualify for the discount. In the chip aisle, a man and woman with carts nuzzling noses, nodded at one another's long windedness. Rye knew old people were cheap, but the discount couldn't have been the sole reason they were at the store—senior day was a singles club for the elderly. Rye pictured them peeling off their clothes, rubbery skin on skin like latex gloves rolling off.

He decided to bury this image by, what the hell, shopping. He grabbed a bag of mixed nuts and salted sticks, Coke, frozen pizza, a twelve-pack of toilet paper. Jimmy Buffet was wasting away again on the overhead speakers. Rye returned to the registers and, entering lane ten, lined up behind a woman with blonde hair. Finally he had found someone near his age. Without moving a muscle she acknowledged him, giving a come hither invitation while keeping watch of the prices beeping on the checkout screen.

Rye slapped the soda, pizza and mixed nuts on the conveyer belt, balking at the toilet paper. *Everybody wipes*, he told himself, *but I'll be damned if I confess such a filthy habit to this woman*. As if for Rye's benefit, she casually sang along with the song. "But I know," she said, pausing with Jimmy Buffet and centering Rye in her sights, "it's my own damn fault."

Lust had always turned Rye crazy. College springs, when girls broke out skimpy shorts and tops that covered only inches of skin, he lost all control of his sweat glands and motor skills. Today it made him backhand the woman on the arm. She grabbed the smacked spot, ready to laugh if given a

reason to. No reason came, for he didn't know why he had slapped her. He could only mutter "my bad" while squeezing out of the lane, fleeing the store and leaving the groceries behind.

"Yeah, you too," Rye said before flipping his cell phone shut. Under the back porch light, he sat at the patio table and watched the empty side yard. An orange lightning bug floated through the yard, its glower stuck on. Cigarette smoke bled to Rye's nose. His groin dropped as if plunging down the first hill of a roller coaster, until he realized Helen, not Sam, was approaching.

"Evening," she said, peering through a screen of smoke. "Where's urines been?"

"Say what?" he asked. *Oh, yourins.* "They're at Erin's momma's for the week."

She gazed at him, orange-faced from cigarette glow. "I didn't peg you as big on the outdoors," she said. "Your little one must get bored out here, living in the sticks."

Oliver had enough toys, some more expensive than Rye's first car, to stave off boredom until puberty took over. "This is a good enough place to raise a kid," he said.

"A boy needs plenty of kin around. I've lived here since I had Bobby. I was a year out of high school and now he's, hmm, thirty-six so I guess I gave away my age. Ours was the first house in the neighborhood. For as long as I can remember, where you're sitting was just a floodplain. Your foundation holding up?"

He looked at his lap as if at a window to the dirt. "Survives Oliver playing *Dance Dance Revolution* twenty-four-seven."

"His twenty-hmm-what?"

Tree insects began chanting. Rye wondered what the bugs looked like, if they were bugs at all. He knew so little of the world right in front of him. Denise's questions about Erin, they could have been a test; had he answered correctly, he would be with her now. On sight he wanted her, but now he was relieved to be home and guilt-free. Even his desires were unknown.

"A week's a mighty long time for a wife to be away," he heard Helen saying. "Seems she leaves you alone more than a bit. Can't say I was away from Robert a single night. You eating square?"

He patted his stomach but didn't care to comment on how easy it

was to eat.

"I sit out here and watch for these hooligans," she said. "I seen gangs on TV. Never thought they'd come out this far, but," she trailed off to take a drag. "You know they glued a plaster pecker on my concrete yard horse. By the way, how old's your boy?"

"Oliver's seven," he said. "He made a plaster hand turkey last Thanksgiving but it looked like a hoof. Building a horse penis might be a little outside his artistic range."

"Well I never did say he did it. How old are *you*?"

His age was a depressing purgatory. The camera had changed its focus to the dependents he took to baseball practice, the grocery—shit, toilet paper. "Old," he said.

"I was teasing." Flirting? He wasn't sure. She was old but took care of herself. Smoking had fought off fat at the expense of deep wrinkles. Rye compared her imagined caramel body to Sam's.

"You getting into anything tonight?" he asked.

Laughing, she flicked the cigarette far into his yard. There were no boundaries. "Yeah, bed," she said. "My own."

He was too tongue-tied to claim she had misunderstood.

The slam of a car door rolled Rye out of bed. He hurried to the landing window. In the yard, Erin stood shading Sam. Sunscreen, a paperback and other trip doodads had been dumped in the grass; a canvas bag covered Oliver's face. The boy stumbled with outstretched mummy arms before lifting the bag for a peek of the girl.

Rye still couldn't look at her, wondered what long-term effects the sight would have on his son. He felt like a kid whose parents had returned from vacation to find party aftermath. Erin nudged Sam with her shoe. The girl scissored her legs and covered her chest. Erin demanded something, moving her mouth and shoulders at double speed like a silent movie actress. She gave a cold stare to Sam's defense, but in a blink she was bent over, hands on stomach, shaking. Crying? No, laughing.

This reaction baffled Rye. His wife would always be a mystery. Cracking one of her layers only led to another puzzle, like an infinite Russian doll hiding smaller clones inside. He couldn't turn away. He watched in dumb wonder, unblinking, amazed to be struck so suddenly by love.