



SweetDelusions

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She saw him out the window when she got up to change the station. She squatted down, lips parted to allow an asthmatic wheeze, and watched.

He crossed the neighbor's yard across the alley, slow and taking pictures from all angles. Pictures! Maybe he's a private detective, or—or ... maybe he's casing the joint. Her eyes widened in horror as she imagined him coming back late at night, stalking stealthily through the yard instead of walking through confidently as he was now; wearing a black watch cap and gloves instead of the blue plaid shirt and down vest.

He turned slightly, as if sensing her presence, and she ducked even further. He had a mustache and brown curly hair, which she thought she should remember should she be asked to identify him after he robbed the neighbor's house. Although, she would have to do her civic duty from the living room, because the idea of leaving the house to go to a police station made her nauseous. The stranger then moved across the alley and she noticed with satisfaction that he walked with a limp. What a perfect way to positively identify him! Maybe she could talk to a policeman. She ran her hand through limp, mousy hair and wished hairdressers were open, and moreover made house calls.

The man hobbled across the alley and opened the gate to another neighbor's house. She knew *those* neighbors worked during the day, so ... She wondered where the limp came from. Maybe it was some sort of injury from his criminal activities. Maybe he'd been caught in the act; some brave soul had refused to become the victim and instead crippled the would-be perpetrator. Yes.

Instead of a burglar, the stranger was probably a mass murderer, like that Bundy. Only instead of seducing his victims into a Volkswagen, this monster struck at the only place people really felt safe: their homes. And during a pandemic! Her lips tightened with indignity. How dare he desecrate a person's castle? She understood it now, the way he did it. The pictures came first, so he knew the layout of the property. Then he probably spent weeks recording the comings and goings of all the members of the house—so he would know when someone was alone and vulnerable.

She gasped. What if he'd already staked out her house? He must know she lived alone, had no dogs, no visitors. She was the perfect victim! In her mind's eye she saw him; *black watch cap blending into the cover of the night, jimmying the loose catch from the window in the second bedroom. His mustache moves up and down as he frowns, then smiles as the catch gives way. Oh God, she'd sworn to have that fixed, but when she'd tried to call the repairman she'd had an anxiety attack and hung up...*

Now he's in, climbing over the sill; leather gloves already on as he steadies himself. He jumps lithely down to the ground, like a panther leaping from rock to rock, fixing on his prey. She can see herself, drugged with sleep; awaking with a start and that strange, indefinable feeling that something is very wrong. The black watch cap bobs along the hallway, rubber gloves swishing softly as he hugs the far wall. She gets up, heart pounding against her ribs like a terrified jackrabbit. She sneaks into the bathroom and searches frenziedly for a weapon. Finding nothing, her breathing becoming shallower, she runs, frantic, through the room and down the hall toward the kitchen. She is gasping now, and her throat makes that grating sound that precedes a full-blown asthma attack—like fingernails on a chalkboard, only harsher. Her animal noises have given her away to her attacker, and she can hear him moving closer.

She yanks drawers and cupboards open, searching for a means to defend herself. Silverware clatters to the floor and she almost falls, tripping as she lunges for the butcher block to retrieve the largest knife. Its gleaming blade slides smoothly out of the wooden sheath. With trembling hands, she sticks the weapon out in front of her, like maybe he will accidentally walk right into it.

Suddenly he is there. As he advances upon her, his shoulder droops every time he favors his bad leg. He's holding a thin wire and a pair of handcuffs, and blood drops are present on the hairs of his mustache, like he had eaten someone alive. He grins devilishly and snaps the wire taut. With a hideous, terrified scream, she rushes toward him. The knife makes a soft schlurp as it imbeds itself in his chest. Through a haze of terror and adrenalin, she wonders dimly why it went in so easily; like it was going through a marshmallow instead of a man's chest...

At the sound of the doorbell, her vision cleared and she looked down. There were brown stains on the front of her faded housedress. The chocolate cake she had made that morning sat on the counter. A large butcher knife protruded from the center of the cake, still vibrating back and forth. She put on a robe to cover the housedress, washed her hands. The doorbell rang again. She crossed to the door and opened it slightly. He was standing in front of her, with his blue plaid shirt and down vest, camera in hand—probably grinning devilishly. She thought she could still see a drop of blood clinging to one of the corners of his mask. It moved up and down as he spoke.

“Hi there! I'm John from Mountain Surveyors. I'd like your permission to take some measurements from the far end of your property. We're planning on paving the alley.”

She ran a hand again through her limp hair, looked him straight in the eye and said, “Absolutely. But first, won't you come in? I just happen to have a chocolate cake; homemade of course. I **insist** you try some.”

He smiles his assent and follows her into the kitchen.

