

## *Barbie Town*

It was the last day of the last summer we played the Barbie Town game, the same day they finished putting in the Ledbetters' hot tub, in time for Miss Jeannie and Bobby Ledbetter's 20th anniversary. It was a Friday, I remember, four days before my 12th birthday, and the caramel cake my mother was going to bake me. And it was the day Belinda Ledbetter drowned.

My mother said what happened to Belinda was an accident. Nobody's fault. Not Miss Jeannie's, not mine, and not anybody else's.

A few days earlier, I'd dropped my great-grandmother's crystal dish when I was serving mixed nuts to the mothers while they talked out on our patio. "It was an accident, honey," my mother said, sweeping up the nuts and pieces of glass. "You were only trying to help."

But the day Belinda drowned I wasn't trying to help. I knew what happened to her was my fault. Bobby Ledbetter—Belinda's father and my pretend husband—knew it, too.

~

If anybody was going to have a Jacuzzi it would have been the Ledbetters. People on our street kept their garbage in their garbage cans and their cars under their carports instead of out in the front yard like rednecks. Everybody's house was new, but the Ledbetters' was split-level instead of all on one floor, with a bay window in the living room. We could have put a Barbie Town restaurant in that bay window.

Living rooms were where we played Barbie Town, starting as soon as the summer got hot. Hardly anyone ever sat in the living room, so the mothers didn't mind. All the mothers, that is, except Miss Jeannie Ledbetter. She had bad headaches and she said our chattering would disturb her peace.

Miss Jeannie Ledbetter's living room would've been perfect for Barbie Town. The gold velvet couch had tasseled silk pillows that made a swishing sound when your fingers slipped across them. The wallpaper, which we weren't allowed to touch, had raised fuzzy flower patterns. Miss Jeannie said they were "fleur-de-lis."

The hot tub was supposed to help Miss Jeannie's headaches, and it was Bobby Ledbetter's anniversary present to her. She'd been talking for the whole summer about how they were going to celebrate out there with a bottle of champagne. She had the workmen hang a rotating light from a cottonwood. It shone hot pink and purple and yellow, colors shooting into the water and reflecting back, like a kaleidoscope. Miss Jeannie showed us her new two-piece bathing suit, hot pink. She bought it at the fanciest store in town, Parks-Belk. She called the color "fuchsia."

My mother let out a little whoop, "Lord have mercy, Jeannie, you won't be leaving a single thing to the imagination! You're about the only person I know could wear that."

Miss Jeannie said fuchsia was Bobby's favorite color on her, and it didn't have to hide anything because Bobby already knew what was under there. They laughed. The mothers were always laughing then.

Before.

I took a good look at the swimsuit so I could find one just like if my mother ever took me to Parks-Belk. I could wear it when the Ledbetters invited everybody over—like Miss Jeannie kept promising—to try out the hot tub once her and Bobby got it good and broken in. The mothers laughed about that, too.

~

Seeing their house and Bobby Ledbetter's car and Miss Jeannie's dresses and shoes and purses, you wouldn't think people like the Ledbetters would have a daughter like Belinda. What bothered me the most about Belinda was how her tongue was always out of her mouth, in the air. My mother said she couldn't help it. Once when my mother thought I was asleep I heard her on the phone telling some other mother that Belinda was a poor little accident, born because Miss Jeannie's birth control pills didn't work.

Maybe she wasn't planned for, but Bobby Ledbetter loved his accident daughter, and she loved him back. Every afternoon when he drove into the driveway in his red convertible Belinda ran out the front door, squealing. As he got out of the car, she would jump up and down and dance around like she could barely stay inside herself. She'd wrap her arms around his waist, still jumping. Bobby would turn her upside down while she squealed and laughed. Sometimes he sat her up on his shoulders and galloped around the cottonwood tree, whinnying like a horse. On summer nights after supper, they'd sit outside, Belinda on Bobby's lap, while he sang Old MacDonald with her and let her make the animal noises. Miss Jeannie stayed inside watching TV. Through the open window you could hear the music from *Cheers*, and then *M.A.S.H.* She

was probably enjoying the peace and quiet—Miss Jeannie always said that all she wanted was some peace and quiet, and I knew she meant from Belinda.

~

I was Belinda's favorite thing after cats and her father. She did everything I did, even things I did against my own will or taste, like my braids. I didn't like them—they made me look like a little girl—but Belinda had to have her hair exactly like mine. She called it a JoBeth hairdo. That's me, JoBeth. People never remember the capital B. Belinda chewed the ends of her braids and I was afraid people might wonder whether I chewed mine, too.

I never wished for the job, in fact, I didn't want it at all, but as soon as Belinda could walk, Miss Jeannie and my mother decided that my job was to mind her and keep her from wandering off. On rainy days I had to stand with her after school beside the Special Ed teacher, Mr. Bell, waiting for Miss Jeannie's beige Buick Le Sabre. Mr. Bell had a white scar on his throat like the white parts in scrambled eggs—he said it was from shrapnel—and his left leg didn't work right. I had to stand with them under the shelter while it rained, right out where everyone could see us.

If it wasn't raining we walked. The worst part about trying to get Belinda to and from school was if she saw a cat. Belinda loved cats more than anything. Bobby Ledbetter would've let her get one, but Miss Jeannie didn't want cat hair all over her gold couch. She said the good Lord knew she didn't need another thing to worry about.

Mr. Bell's classroom, where Belinda had to go, was at the far end of a long hall lined on both sides with lockers. Belinda's palm was sweaty and she squeezed too tight, but it was better

to give her my hand than to risk her squeals. I looked straight ahead when we passed Dawn Erskine and LeeAnn Webb. They checked their feathered hair in LeeAnn's heart-shaped mirror and bent down to wipe smudges that weren't there from their white patent-leather boots. They acted like they didn't notice the boys circled around Stan Weaver's locker, but they didn't fool me.

Sometimes Dawn and LeeAnn talked to me. Some days they even asked me to eat lunch with them. Most days they didn't. I had a Plan B: Marilee Ford and Becca Buntin were happy to sit with someone who sometimes got to sit with Dawn and LeeAnn. Marilee's hair was feathered like Dawn's. Becca's mother let her get her ears pierced and wear dangly earrings, so they were okay to sit with as a second choice. When I came through the lunch line with my mystery meat or hamburger or macaroni and cheese and the milk I never drank, if I didn't see Dawn craning her neck and waving, I'd go right to Plan B like that was exactly what I wanted to do anyway. Lunch was when I started to feel normal again.

I knew Dawn would wave every day if it wasn't for Belinda.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, for softball or kickball, Dawn always picked me first. I was the best girl runner in the class, and when I crossed home plate, Dawn and LeeAnn did cheerleader jumps and yelled out my name. Plan B Becca did too, but I ignored her.

~

For the Barbie Town game, the girls brought their Barbies and Kens, and things for their Barbie houses. There was a church, a grocery store, and a mall for the Barbies to go shopping. We decided where the Kens worked and what the Barbies were going to make for supper.

In my head, my Ken's name was Bobby Ledbetter and my Barbie was me. When I put them to bed for the night they slept under a bedspread I'd made from my mother's eyelet negligée that she never wore. It looked like the bedspreads they had on *All My Children*. I could watch it at Becca's because her mother worked and her grandmother was deaf and forgot things. I liked it when Erica Kane sat on her bed and she and one of her husbands started taking off all their clothes.

It goes without saying that my mother made us include Belinda in the Barbie Town game. At the beginning of every summer, Miss Jeannie got Belinda a new Barbie started, because Belinda chewed their arms and legs and cut their hair off.

Belinda didn't care much about her Barbies; what she liked was to manage the grocery store. She brought the little cabbages, bottles of milk, roasts, and fried eggs from her dollhouse. My mother helped her cut out other groceries from magazines and paste them on pieces of cardboard so they'd last.

When you went to the store Belinda counted out your order. She told you everything cost \$14.57, no matter what you bought. When there was nobody in the store, she played with the kitten from the dollhouse hearth, a tiny yellow tabby with black stripes, curled up tight, asleep. She called the kitten Barley. At the funeral home, Bobby Ledbetter put Barley in Belinda's hand and closed her fingers around him. Then Bobby kissed her forehead. Miss Jeannie didn't see him do it, but I did.

I never wanted anything bad to happen to Belinda, I only wished she would stop bothering me for a while.

Be careful what you wish for. Miss Jeannie said that. One day she told us she wished their TV would quit working so Bobby would get her a new one. Then it quit, and the next morning while it was still dark she had to walk across the little strip of yard separating out houses so she could watch Princess Diana get married. Even in her housecoat Miss Jeannie was a beauty queen. On the Ledbetters' mantel was a picture of Miss Jeannie with her crown, in a baby blue one-piece swimsuit with a sash across it, and matching baby blue high heels—Miss Madison County 1961. Bobby's arm was around her and they were leaning up against Bobby's car. His NASCAR helmet was on the hood.

In the late afternoon the mothers drank wine coolers out on our patio. Miss Jeannie would tell about how she'd met Bobby in Memphis when she was doing one of her five-year post-pageant events. The board sent the reigning queen to ribbon cuttings and college sports events, and the former ones went to the racetracks. Bobby was the youngest driver on the circuit, only 17 years old. When she told that part Miss Jeannie would smile down at her glass, turning it around in her hand so the ice tinkled, "I just *plumb* robbed that cradle."

Somebody would chime in, "I reckon you did!" And the mothers would laugh the kind of laugh they used to laugh, the kind I didn't understand but wanted to.

Miss Jeannie could still smile her pageant smile but the wrinkles around her eyes and beside her mouth stayed there after the smile was gone. And between her eyebrows the mark like

a sideways equals sign never left her face. I watched her, from our kitchen window, washing dishes at her sink and frowning.

~

My stomach took a little dip every time I saw Bobby Ledbetter, like I'd seen somebody from television or the movies. In his sunglasses he looked like Warren Beatty in *Bonnie and Clyde*, which I wasn't allowed to see because it was R-rated. But I did, at the mall with Plan B Marilee, when we were supposed to be Christmas shopping. The Ledbetters' son Shane was captain of the football team. Shane was the kind of boyfriend Marilee was going to have when she got to high school. Marilee must have whispered to me 10 times during the movie that Warren Beatty looked like Shane, but I looked up at the screen and saw Bobby.

When the movie ended with Warren Beatty all by himself, I took it as a sign from God that one day I would marry Bobby Ledbetter. Before I went to sleep at night I'd wonder what Bonnie was planning to do when they'd been lying on the bed kissing and then she unzipped Clyde's trousers.

Bobby was the only father who stayed in town during the week. All the other fathers were on the road selling canned meat or brushes or floor cleaner, driving all the way over to Fayetteville, North Carolina, or down into Louisiana, and back again by Friday night. From Monday to Friday, it was like Bobby was the husband for the whole street. If someone had a clogged up sink or her car broke down or she needed somebody to cut a branch off a tree after a storm, she called Bobby.

One evening after supper when my mother was out working in the yard, I put on my flash-dance shirt and leg warmers and a tiny bit of my mother's lipstick. Then I broke up the leftover biscuits and stuffed the pieces down the sink. With the sprayer, I ran some water in there on top of it and the water stayed, so I yelled out the back door to my mother that the sink was stopped up.

"Go on over and get Bobby, then!" floated in from the flowerbeds, and I was on my way.

While Bobby was squatted down working under our sink, his T-shirt rode up in the back. In the triangle where his jeans pulled down there was golden tanned skin furred with little black hairs. There wasn't a clog in the pipes but he washed them out anyway and pulled the mushy biscuit out of the drain with his fingers. He winked at me on the way out and said he liked my leg warmers. He said green was a nice color on me.

I never clogged up our sink again after that because I could get Bobby's attention another way: I was the star of the track team—I even beat girls in the grade ahead of me from schools across town, or even way over in Memphis. Once when my mother had a church meeting, she sent Bobby Ledbetter to watch my race. I won first place and there was Bobby, behind the finish line, holding Belinda's hand while she jumped up and down. He gave me a hug, and he didn't seem to mind the sweat. Then he tugged on my braids and told me I ran like lightning. He drove us home in his red car and we stopped at the Tasty Freeze.

Bobby only came that once, but he would always ask me how my running was going. And after that, whenever I raced, I ran like Bobby Ledbetter was watching me, feeling the wind

pick my hair up off my neck and blow it out behind me. I was fast, and so was Bobby. When I won, it was for Bobby Ledbetter. We were both racers, in our way, and we understood each other.

Another way I could see Bobby was by pretending to enjoy going to the movies with Belinda. Whenever there was a Walt Disney movie playing at the mall, Bobby took Belinda to see it and he'd invite me to go, too. We saw *Fantasia* four times because Belinda liked the dancing flowers. Riding in the back seat with Belinda, I looked at the back of Bobby Ledbetter's head. The hair was thick and it curled down over the top of his collar. Once I reached out my finger and almost touched it.

Bobby bought each of us our own Coca-Cola and we shared the popcorn. I never got to sit by Bobby because Belinda wanted to be in the middle. Whatever Belinda wanted to do, Bobby let her. I was always especially nice to Belinda at the movies, acting like I imagined Miss Jeannie might do: making sure she didn't spill Coca-Cola down her front or wipe her hand on the seat. In the dark of the movie theater I watched Bobby smile at the funny parts and a tingle started up near my ribcage and then trickled down.

My mother thought it was just that I liked the movies and that I liked taking Belinda. She would offer to take us sometimes when Bobby couldn't, but I would always say no.

My mother was good, and she believed I was, too.

~

That day, Miss Jeannie dropped Belinda off at our house. She was on her way to have her hair frosted and feathered like Farrah Fawcett. After the beauty shop, Miss Jeannie was going to take a nap and then get dressed up. Before the hot tub, Bobby was taking her to Baudo's, the

nicest restaurant in town, where you could eat real Italian food and then disco dance. I'd never been there before, but I'd seen their commercials on TV. I wanted to go there with Bobby Ledbetter.

Dawn Erskine showed up after lunch. That surprised me. The Erskines lived at the end of our street, but Dawn had never played Barbie Town. She'd just gotten back from a special camp where she and LeeAnn Webb had learned to be cheerleaders so they could win the try-outs when we started junior high in the fall.

Dawn was wearing a cheerleader outfit with a "P" on it, for Parkway Junior High, even though we didn't go there yet. She sat on the edge of the couch, beside my Barbie house, watching us. I tried to act like the Barbies weren't mine, crossing my arms like Dawn did and looking at everybody else like I too had just gotten there.

After a few minutes, Dawn asked why our Barbies were all married to our Kens—it would be more fun if they just went on dates. "They could take the Barbies out to eat and then to the discotheque!"

That made me think of Bobby Ledbetter and Miss Jeannie slow dancing together at Baudo's. My stomach tightened up like fingers closing into a fist.

"Y'all could make a disco over where those flowers are," Dawn pointed toward my mother's plastic begonia pot. "It can be outdoors—they can dance under the trees."

Plan B Marilee wanted to know what people did at a disco. I could see her looking at Dawn's hair, the way she'd started parting it on the side instead of the middle.

“What do you think they do?” Dawn looked at Marilee like she felt sorry for her. “Dance! And they drink mixed drinks and neck.”

Marilee asked what necking was, which made me glad because I didn't know either. After Dawn told us, I thought about Bobby necking with Miss Jeannie out on the dance floor and my stomach hurt worse.

“We have to make a bar for the disco,” Dawn had her hands on her hips, looking around the room. “Y'all got any magazines?”

“Bobby Ledbetter has racing magazines.” I felt my stomach shiver when I said his name. “When he gets home we can ask him for some. They have beer ads in them.”

“We can't wait around for him. Happy hour starts at five.” Dawn was taking over my bossy role, but that was all right with me.

I raided the stack of old magazines my mother kept in the laundry room. My mother told me once that if you give children like Belinda a specific task, they'll concentrate on it until they're done because they have all the time in the world. I got the scissors from my fifth-grade art kit and put Belinda in charge of cutting. Dawn found magazine ads with tiny bottles of beer and liquor with names we couldn't pronounce. Belinda cut out the bottles, even the little ones, without making a single mistake. Dawn told her she did a nice job. I stood beside Dawn, with my arms crossed, nodding my head.

When the sun got lower, the mothers arrived to drink their wine coolers. From Barbie Town, we could see into our kitchen. My mother was putting everything onto a tray to take outside.

Miss Jeannie pranced in and tossed her purse down on the kitchen counter. “The hot tub’s all ready to go!” She had her macramé purse with round wooden handles like in the fashion magazines. It went with her macramé wedge-heeled sandals. I liked those shoes, and I was going to have some just like them when I was married to Bobby Ledbetter.

My mother was filling the glasses. The ice made little popping sounds when the pink liquid hit it.

Miss Jeannie ran her fingers through her hair and gave her head a little shake. “How do I look?”

Miss Jeannie could only stay for a minute, just long enough for one wine cooler to calm her nerves. She said my mother was the sweetest thing to look after Belinda for her while she and Bobby had their celebration. I felt something hard move from my stomach up inside my throat.

As soon as the mothers were out the screen door, Dawn grabbed my arm. “Let’s see what she’s got in her purse.” She pulled me into the kitchen.

Out came Miss Jeannie’s keychain, a little miniature red convertible, and then her snakeskin billfold. “This is real!” Dawn ran her fingers over it. “Are they rich?”

“Really rich,” I whispered. “They have the best house on the street, and that keychain is just like Bobby Ledbetter’s convertible. He used to be a NASCAR driver.”

“Bobby Ledbetter this, Bobby Ledbetter that!” Dawn nudged me with her shoulder, like I’d seen her do with LeeAnn. “You want to get *down* with him.”

“Do *not*!” I shook my head and giggled.

With her hand still rooting around in the purse, Dawn bumped her butt against mine. “Do *too!*” She pulled out Miss Jeannie’s makeup compact. “We’ll get you looking all foxy for *Bobby.*”

“Shut *up!*” I followed Dawn down the hall, smiling so hard my face hurt.

“This must have cost at least \$10!” Dawn held up an eye-shadow kit in earth colors, which were the right kind for me. I had taken a quiz in *Young Miss* once while we were in the checkout line at the grocery store, and I was a Fall.

Dawn didn’t even get the makeup laid out on the dresser before Belinda showed up. “What y’all doing?”

I leaned over close to Dawn’s ear. “You better do her, too, so she’ll let us alone.

It was getting close to time for Bobby to come home from work; I could take Belinda over to meet him, holding her hand, with makeup on. Once he saw me, maybe he’d decide not to go to supper at Baudo’s after all. While he sang Old MacDonald with Belinda, I’d cross my arms and cock my head in a flirty way, like Dawn did when there were boys around. Miss Jeannie could stay inside and watch *Cheers* and *M.A.S.H.* like she always did.

While Dawn worked on Belinda, I took my hair out of the braids and used Miss Jeannie’s tortoiseshell brush to smooth the waves over my shoulders. In the mirror, I saw that I was at least as pretty as Miss Jeannie, maybe prettier. Belinda sat still long enough for Dawn to do her eyeshadow but she wiggled off the bed with her lipstick half done. When I closed my eyes so Dawn could do my eyeshadow, Belinda had her feet in a pair of my father’s shoes.

The sun spilling in bright through the window sheers made negative shapes on the inside of my eyelids, light where they should be dark and dark where they should be light. Feeling the makeup brush tickle over my lids, I watched the shapes become me riding beside Bobby Ledbetter in his red convertible. I was wearing makeup and beige macramé sandals, and my wavy hair was blowing in the breeze.

I don't know how long I had my eyes closed, whether it was long enough for Belinda to drown.

On the phone later that night while I ate the leftover potato chips from the wine-cooler tray for supper, my mother talked about how long it takes for somebody to drown. One of my cousins was a lifeguard and my mother said it could take as little as two minutes. After that there would be severe brain damage anyway and you'd probably be better off dead.

I remember that my eyes flew open as soon as I heard Bobby Ledbetter cry out and Belinda wasn't in the room with us anymore.

I was the fastest so I got to Bobby first. He had Belinda cradled in his arms, rocking her. One of Belinda's shoes was floating in the hot tub. Her wet hair was stuck to his arm, and there were smudges of shimmery blue eye shadow and black mascara on the front of his shirt.

Miss Jeannie got there last, maybe the macramé sandals were hard to run in. She didn't say anything. She was right behind me and she looked terrified.

Bobby's face was red and covered with tears. "You were right there. *Right* there." His voice sounded like something was strangling him from inside.

It might have seemed like he was talking to Miss Jeannie, but I knew he was talking to me. Minding Belinda and keeping her from wandering off had always been my job.

At the funeral home, when I saw Bobby close Belinda's fingers around the toy cat, I knew I'd taken from him the person he most loved in the world.

The day after Belinda's funeral, Bobby Ledbetter left in his red convertible and he didn't come back.

~

Every day for the next month, my mother and Miss Jeannie drank wine coolers out on our patio.

I'd walk softly into the kitchen and stand close enough to the window to listen, but just far enough to the side so they couldn't see me.

"It was an accident, honey. An awful, terrible accident." My mother would refill their glasses and put her arm around Miss Jeannie, hugging her close like a little child and stroking her hair. "God took her, Sugar, right up to heaven."

One of those days was my birthday. My mother was so worried about Miss Jeannie she forgot about my caramel cake, which I didn't deserve anyway. She remembered after supper, and let me stay up to wait for it.

We ate big pieces, with ice cream melting fast because the cake was still hot, watching the late movie. It starred someone named Lana Turner, and it made my mother cry. Everything made my mother cry then.

~

Miss Jeannie didn't come over for a while.

It was after Thanksgiving that I finally saw her, in high heels and lipstick and her black coat with the mink collar, getting into a car. I heard my mother tell somebody on the phone that Miss Jeannie had met a dentist. It was a good thing, too, my mother said—bless her heart, Miss Jeannie needed a man to put her right.

Soon after that there was a For Sale sign in the front yard. In the hot tub, the water was half-frozen and covered with dead leaves, mold growing along the sides. Some workmen came to take it away. They put everything in plastic garbage bags and piled them beside the street.

The next morning before it was light outside, I lay in bed listening to the garbage truck squeezing the bags in, and then to the quiet once it drove away.

*Ready*

It is your day off. You are on your knees in the sitting room, retouching the baseboards. Butter Cream Luxury to contrast with the teal accent wall—you really need the security deposit back. The paint fumes smell like car exhaust. As they roil your queasy stomach, you wish you were dead.

Being dead would solve several immediate problems. Like the unholy hangover making your brush-hand shake. You stop, take a small sip of Diet Coke, feel just the tiniest bit better, and take another.

While sipping, you stare out the window at the widower's yard, which is empty, front and back. Heat shimmers in the air above the hedge, Tennessee August served up thick and humid.

You are thankful for the state-of-the-art air-conditioning, which you should probably turn off because you're going to have to get used to a mobile home with a two-burner hot plate and a fan.

Being dead would solve this, too. As it would your fall from grace. Six months ago you were the charming wife of the winningest basketball coach Memphis State had ever known. You were Madame Chairwoman of the Booster Club, lunching and brunching with boosters and donors' wives. Bake sales, cotillions, tailgate parties. Pencil skirts and crisp sleeveless blouses, kitten heels click-clicking purposefully down the driveway to your car as you waved across the hedge at the scruffy widower with his beard and his Chicago accent, asking him how the squash, in his (scruffy) back yard, was coming along. The widower smiled at your calves, or maybe your shoes, or both.

*Car.* You scribble the word on the notepad you keep in your pocket. Whatever happens—your bank account is as empty as your queasy stomach—you cannot lose the car. You might have to live in it behind the Country Club where you now tend bar, pouring wine for those same boosters and donors.

Chairing the booster club hasn't resulted in a plethora of saleable skills. You telemarket: you are that voice, peddling condos near golf courses to people too lazy or clueless to get onto the National Do-Not-Call list.

And there's the phone-sex line; they adore your Southern accent.

A bright spot: the University isn't suing you for damages. Technically, these are your husband's damages. A gambling habit fed by embezzled booster funds and a betting pool run from his computer. The unpardonable offense, said the boosters, even worse than hiring stripper escorts for recruits, was Trey's ('Trey' being your husband's preference over Son of Junior) deliberately orchestrated loss of the play-off.

The Boosters, *bless their hearts*, are letting you stay in the coach's mansion until you "get on your feet." As long as you do it by September first. Which is in two weeks.

If dead, you wouldn't need to "get on your feet." You might even forget that you now belong to that exclusive club of women whose husbands die of heart attacks while screwing their mistresses. Starla is the slutty name of Trey's mistress. She is a massage artist with special training in sports technique. Trey bought the farm while touring Dubai with a team of retired third-string NBA-ers, Starla rubbing all the way.

Shipping a body home from Dubai is hideously expensive. And then you have to bury it, hence the cleaned-out bank account.

Most importantly, being dead would save you from remembering last night.

After a whole day of cold-calling—no one wants a condo—you lobbed a tired "How 'bout those squash?" across the hedge because there he was, and you had to say something. The widower said he was sorry about your husband.

"Me, too," you said, though it wasn't true in the same way.

The widower offered to buy you dinner.

You accepted. You drank. Then you drank some more. You assured him it had never bothered you that he and his late wife, a plant biologist, had stopped mowing their lawn and called it a meadow. The Neighborhood Association are a bunch of tight-asses, you said, and you had never even noticed the composting. The School Board, too: creationism is big down here, but they should stay out of his fifth-grade classroom. You are down with liberals. Hell, you might even be one. You're pretty sure you said that loudly.

After dinner you invited him in using the kitten-y voice that sold the phone-sex people. You sat close to him on the settee. Then you planted one on him, *avec langue*, which surprised him at first. Then it made him happy.

You placed a hand on his thigh and asked him how his zucchini was coming along. Then you were on the floor.

But you ruined a good thing. Just as your skirt was coming off, you sat up and started to sob. About Trey and Starla, about world hunger, a do-nothing Congress, and the loss of the rainforest. About being a telemarketer and a middle-aged woman pouring drinks in a plaid vest.

You awoke in your bed alone, your skirt zipped up. Mouth like you'd chewed through a bale of cotton, jack-hammer reverberating in your skull. You decided to paint the trim.

The doorbell rings. You stalk to answer it, paintbrush in hand, prepared to give that reporter from the *Tennessee Clarion* a piece of your mind. You've had to change two fucking cell-phone numbers. Fucking Trey is dead. This story is fucking *o-v-e-r*. As booster club president, you never said *fuck*.

It's not a reporter, nor your lawyer, though you probably should have returned his calls. It is not a booster, *just checking in on you*.

It's the widower. He says he has the mother of all hangovers and asks how you are. He is holding a basket full of zucchini.

You smile. Your mouth feels rusty, but you stop wanting to be dead. When you take the basket from him, your thoughts turn to new recipes you might like to try.