

The Voyeur

by Lydia Johnson

He watches from his place across the street as the child came down the porch steps. A little boy with brown hair and a green shirt takes them one at a time, a plastic dump truck in his hand. The boy plops himself down in the grass near the house. He can see his head moving up and down as the small child drove the truck over the grass, killing ants and crushing leaves. Every time his shiny hair can be seen over the hedges, he feels a familiar feeling. A buzzing in his stomach, a tingle in his chest. His hands grips the steering wheel until they hurt. He can't tear his eyes away from the child; holds his breath for each time he sees his little head bobbing up and down, the movement expected like a pendulum swing.

It takes everything in his power to stay in the car. The seat belt is one layer of defense, as are the locked doors and the shoeless driving, all meant to discourage him from crossing the asphalt. He wants to get out of the car and cross the street. Enter the yard and hear the satisfying crunch of leaves underfoot. Be quiet as a mouse on the grass, reach the child and smile. Speak in quiet tones while scanning the porch and furtively peer through the open door. Talk about the bright yellow truck and the bright green shirt. Laugh with smiling eyes and talk about a real truck he doesn't actually have that looks so much like the toy. Ask the child if he wants to see it. Catch the excitement in his eyes and put out a welcoming hand. Lead the little boy down his own sidewalk, away from his own house, across the shady street that the man only knows through late nights in a drink induced haze. A street the man sees through early mornings watching the mother walk the dog, the house silent. He wants to take him, strap him into the car seat he bought with uncertainty the night before and has ready in the car, the price tag and cardboard label still attached. Give him some apple juice and cookies and smile at him from the front seat. Tell him not to worry or look back at the house he'd never see again.

But he does not.

He lets his son stay in the yard that was bought with alimony payments and child support, ensconced in an invisible fence of legalities that guarantee he will never go near him, won't talk to the boy on a crowded city street until he becomes a man of his own. His mind flashes back as the boy turns his head, a springy curl falling over one eye. He remembers holes in walls as big as moon craters. Garbage cans filled with the long necked glass bottles and aluminum cans of his regret. He hears small disagreements that grew into full-blown arguments and screams, watches the bruises and welts rise and multiply across his wife's body and wonders again how they got there. A final image of the fear that blazed in her eyes the last time he hit her as she curled around the womb he didn't know held life.

She steps out onto the porch and the screen door swings shut behind her. The bruises have gone, but she moves slowly down the stairs as if she remembers them. Her mouth opens with a smile and shuts into a straight line. David. The boy runs to her on wobbly legs and buries his face in the folds of her skirt before she reaches down to pick him up.

He starts the car and drives off. He imagines his heart being rolled over by the yellow dump truck as they grow smaller in the rear-view.