

Squirrel Patrol

by Aimee Parkison

My husband laughed at night as I worried about the empty house. Our neighbors had begun entering the house next door, and he said he didn't care. Rubbing me beneath the covers, caressing my inner thighs, he whispered about trespassers. Rick's hands were gentle then. As usual, he had the tender touch, but I didn't want him to caress me because of what I was thinking, the vacant splitter outside our bedroom window, the sound of his voice when I didn't appreciate what he was telling me.

From Rick's ragged whispers in the dark, I gathered the man who once lived inside the foreclosure was injured in a motorcycle accident one misty summer night in the rain. On rainy nights, Tennessee highways were more dangerous than live wires, so I assumed his accident had something to do with the subsequent loss of the house. Apparently, he had a young wife and twin daughters. Although they were gone before Rick and I moved into the neighborhood, I often wondered why the empty house stood neglected, personal possessions inside the rooms.

Our neighbors became trespassers, breaking into the empty house in broad daylight, but I couldn't risk confronting them.

I imagined droppings across the floor, warped doorframes, a skittering in my mind. Having once majored in architecture, I knew one house could mean different things to different people. As carpenter ants reshaped rotted wood, architecture wasn't just design but memory, context, opportunity. Even in the best neighborhoods, just like in the worst, fate was the architect of all foreclosures. The empty house stood empty because of a tragic accident, which made squirrels lucky because humans suffered. Design, like space, was a harbinger to time, abandoned nests under eaves, animals

crawling through dead leaves.

Trespassers lugged bulky items through shadowy spaces, congregating in the sitting room where squirrels darted in and out of broken windows. Watching them, I realized tragedies happen because damage is the brainchild of discovery. Disrepair has a design of its own. Even now, I see it best in abandoned spaces used for unintended purposes. I didn't know it then, but I know it now: violence is an art form. Trespassers reinvent the houses they enter in the same way criminals transform victims who survive violent crimes.

This, too, is architecture.

This is—or was—a neighborhood. My neighborhood, the neighborhood of the motorcycle man.

The gate remained unlocked, as did the sliding-glass door in the backyard. The bank seemed to have lost interest in the property, which the manager and inspectors rarely visited. It was hard to watch the trespassers, to pretend not to see people going in and out, freely, even in broad daylight, carrying items out of the back doors—a mini musical organ, a projector, dishes, a bicycle, an oven, a dishwasher, and a guitar.

Even though it was a victimless crime, I said, "It isn't right."

"Why?" Rick asked.

The neighbors were plundering, getting away with it, while I watched and got nothing.

Rick kissed me in the morning. I watched squirrels in the windows. Dirty windows.

"They are vandals," I said, "all of them, especially the squirrels." They were prowling behind barred windows, staring me down from the other side of the glass.

"No more squirrel patrol," Rick said.

"But they're there, inside the house," I whispered, imagining squirrels running through

the rooms. Were they trapped inside?

On my days off, I explored the neighborhood alone. When walking, I sometimes felt someone watching me like the squirrels, but there were so many trees growing close together along the trail it was hard to know for certain. Eventually, I saw one of the boys from the local high school, Billy Teller. A long tall drink of water, Billy wore faded jeans and a ripped t-shirt stained with a V of sweat. He smelled sweet, beery so bees flocked to him on the wooded trails.

“What you’re doing isn’t right.” He lit a cigarette and walked away into the trees, where another high school boy, Abraham Jones, stood watching. The boys disappeared in vines encircling trees surrounded by overgrown shrubs.

Nearing my house, I studied fallen branches dangling from power lines and phone lines. Squirrels leapt onto roofs, chewing rotten wood beneath damaged shingles. I felt as if Billy or Abraham were still watching, following me, but I couldn’t see them because of the dense trees and brush along the creek trail behind the houses.

Because the neighborhood had been built over an old pecan grove, pecans fell every year, keeping the squirrels exuberant as they gazed into the windows of houses nearest their favorite nut trees. Whenever I walked out onto the balcony, I heard rustling in the leaves. And another sound: cracking and thudding. I assumed this was the sound of branches breaking and falling to the ground.

“Hidden,” Rick said, as I stared at the two boys, whom Rick simply ignored, “by dirt and leaves.”

I thought of how the vines and the new leaves had begun to hide even the trespassers who entered the back door through its damaged sliding glass panel. The squirrels, too, had begun to re-enter the foreclosure, gnawing through the rotted roof.

Taking branches fallen from a large pecan tree that grew on the strip of land between our house and the house on the left, Rick reclaimed materials from the scrap pile. A long-sanded

board, eye bolts, and rope were transformed. Rick climbed the tree and hung the swing from a large branch near our bedroom window. In this pecan tree, barred owls roosted.

“The motorcycle man,” Rick said, “was a professor.”

“And he died?”

Rick didn’t answer.

Smiling, I grabbed the rope and looked up at the owls’ nest. I wanted to swing through the night as the owls called to each other during mating season. Addicted to the simple pleasure I once thought lost to childhood, I swung under the shadow of pecans for hours.

Watching the squirrels in the windows as they watched me, I peered into the naked windows of the investor’s house and realized the curtains had been stripped.

“Who’s that?” I asked, seeing a man walking inside the house and surveying its contents.

“The investor,” Rick said, “just bought it for a song.”

As I swung over the next several days, the investor escorted buyers through the rooms. I assumed they were collectors and shop owners. They seemed to appraise items, handling the possessions of the professor as if to assess their value and quality.

The people who lived in the house before the squirrels must have been packrats. Or hoarders. How else could there be so many items left to sell after so many items had been stolen?

I watched in disbelief, unseen in the pecan trees’ shadows, or so I thought. The investor sold china, wine glasses, antiques, framed art, photographs, books, wooden furniture, cutlery, and jewelry. Even a pair of mountain bikes. A striped humpback sofa, an art deco waterfall bed set, Asian folding screens, and mirrors were carried by crews of movers. Big sweaty men hoisted cumbersome items onto an unmarked truck. They lifted pedestals, a wine bar, and an entertainment center complete with a bridge. Later, a truck marked “antiques” hauled away a mid-century king set and queen set, a mid-century Haywood & Wakefield kneehole desk, and a set

of four Tommy Bahama Style Armchairs.

I ached with longing for the library of old books that remained, the cream armchair and matching ottoman, the pine dresser with chest and nightstand. I coveted the oak electric fireplace, the sleeper sofa with its air mattress, the rocker, and the tall chest—even if they were all covered with scratches and squirrel droppings.

An elderly woman, possibly the investor's mother, ordered men who loaded jewelry boxes, chandeliers, clocks, mirrors, Persian & Oriental rugs, and a mid-century dinette into her pickup truck.

What caught my attention most of all was displayed on the house's front yard. In overgrown grass, near the untrimmed hedges, rested an antique mule trunk, a pair of upholstered arm chairs, and a lovely pewter-leaf mirror. I felt these items belonged inside my house, even if I couldn't afford to buy them and even if they were gnawed by rodent teeth. Squirrels, like most rodents, were always chewing because their teeth never stopped growing.

Behind the windows, the investor gestured wildly as buyers at the private estate sale touched and examined items. I peered inside, straining my eyes, and was surprised to catch glimpses of Rick inside the house with the squirrels. Once the buyers left, the workmen began to clear the remaining contents, taking truckloads of damaged goods and paperwork, probably to the local dump. As I swung, I watched my husband walking behind the windows with the investor.

Rick began to move the furniture from the grass into our house. When I asked him how he managed to haggle for the items, he only kissed me the way he always kissed me, softly at first but then harder. His stubble began to hurt me, burning my face until I opened my mouth. He sucked the air out of me and then breathed his breath into me. In those early years of marriage, for some reason, CPR was foreplay. That meant something. I just never knew what.

The following nights I was awakened by an engine, a motorcycle revving, racing through the neighborhood streets. My husband was

missing from our bedroom. Where was he? When would he be coming back? In the dark bedroom, the sound of the motorcycle cruising so close by the house, repeatedly, gave me chills. I thought of the empty house.

I almost never asked questions about the motorcycle, which my husband began driving at night and parking in our carport during the day. Perhaps because I was so pleased with the furniture, when it came to the motorcycle, I waited for my husband to tell me what he wanted me to know.

When I went outside, entering the carport the next morning, I found a dead squirrel beside the driver's side door of our old car. The squirrel was just lying there on the concrete, no marks on it, fat and healthy and perfect looking, eyes wide open. Only one thing seemed to be wrong with it—its tail was gone. Just gone. And nowhere I could see. Strangely, the tail didn't seem to have been raggedly torn or bitten off. It had been cut clean from the body.

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When Rick began riding the motorcycle, I began substitute teaching at the local high school, where Billy Teller and Abraham Jones were students. Since my oldest students were not that much younger than I, I was often mistaken for a student walking the high-school halls. Rick was doing lots of odd jobs in those days, mostly welding and construction. A handyman and a private contractor, Rick always seemed busy working for the investor, so I became lonely and started talking to some of my students more than I talked to him. I began talking to Abraham after school and between classes as Billy watched from a distance.

Each weekday morning, I woke early, waiting for a call from the high school. As a new substitute teacher, I was eager to work. I made myself available, even at the last minute. I wanted to teach every day. On the days I walked to work, Abraham Jones often walked with me, but his friend Billy Teller did not.

"You've seen people going in and out of the house?" Abraham asked, and I pretended I had-

n't known his parents were among the trespassers. His family lived in a large brick ranch-style house up the street from my house, four houses up from the house on the right.

"And squirrels," I said.

Long dark curls fell over his deep-set brown eyes, hiding one eye completely. With his sweet smile and very white teeth, he was the type of boy I would have had a crush on, when I was still in high school, less than five years before I met him.

His face was so beautiful before Billy ruined it.

Like Abraham, Billy had been suspended for two weeks because of the fight. Unlike Abraham, Billy never returned to school after his suspension ended.

"Probably dropped out," the principal later said. "For the best, really."

I agreed.

When Abraham walked back home with me, I decided to ask about Billy, one more time, just to make sure he was gone.

"Mind if I walk with you, again?" Abraham asked.

I liked the company and knew he would never tell anyone what happened. I remembered waking on the bathroom tile, shivering, stunned as he helped me stand.

"Keep an eye on Abraham," the principal, Mr. Peters, had said to me after the fight between Billy and Abraham. "I know he considers you a friend. He's a good boy. You might be able to save him before he becomes another Billy Teller."

At night, swinging alone on my swing, I saw Billy watching me through a window, hiding in the vacant house on the left.

I couldn't tell Rick because I feared he might kill Billy after guessing what he had done.

I had no visible injuries. Without injuries, there was no proof. I couldn't talk to Rick. I couldn't tell the school because it was Billy's word against mine, especially because so many female teachers had been arrested, jailed, and exposed on television for having sex with stu-

dents in high schools across the nation.

What if people thought I wanted it to happen?

What if he did it again and claimed we were dating? What if I had to register as a sex offender, even though I was the victim? Just because I was the adult and he was the child, my student, didn't mean he didn't have power over me. That's the thing no one will tell you about power. No one can give it to you. You have to take it, and it can be taken away.

Abraham spent a day at the hospital and then his family kept him inside his house, grounded, his bruised face healing.

When Abraham visited me at my house later, he said, "I used to know him."

"Who?" I asked, worried he meant my husband.

"Jarred Plano, the guy who lived in that house." Abraham pointed to the foreclosure, the house on the left. "He had two daughters. And a wife, Laney. A beautiful woman I used to swing with. So did Billy. He had a motorcycle."

Just then, my husband's truck pulled into the driveway. I told Abraham he had to go.

Abraham walked away, but when he neared the house on the left, he stopped, looked back, and said, "Who put that back?"

"What?" I asked.

"The swing."

"What do you mean?"

"It was here before."

Abraham walked across the yard to the swing and bent over to examine the seat, the eyebolts, and the ropes.

That evening, I fried an entire package of bacon. Slicing three tomatoes, I prepared BLT sandwiches for dinner, Rick's favorite food, to put him in a good mood.

"Lots of mayo," he said. "Not too much lettuce. Make that bacon crispy."

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Tomatoes sliced thinly?" he asked.

Even though these sandwiches were his absolute favorite, there were things that could ruin them for him: stingy mayonnaise, excessive

lettuce, soggy bacon, and thick tomato slices. I made sure that I always prepared the sandwiches to his liking, especially that evening when I needed answers.

"Terrific," he said, sitting down at the table with its plastic covering, his plate piled high with sandwiches.

"I've really been enjoying my swing," I said.

"Great."

"How did you ever think to put a swing there, anyway?"

"Why?"

"It's such a perfect place for a swing, really on the very edge of the property. How did you think to put it there, of all places?"

He took a bite, chewing carefully. "Let me think."

"Where did you get the swing, Rick?"

"What?"

"Where did it come from?"

Reaching for another sandwich, studying the sandwich carefully, he put it down on his plate. "What?"

"Someone told me that swing used to be here, before we moved here."

"That kid from the school? The one who's got a fuck up face and is always following you around? What happened to him, anyway?"

"He said ours is the same swing that was there before, that you just put it back where it was."

"Is that a crime?"

I began to wonder. Then, I started to wonder if it was wrong to keep secrets from my husband. What good did it do to report crimes? It would only hurt the neighborhood and property values even more, I reasoned, rationalizing my secrets. No one would want to live here, teach in the school, or let their children go there. So many crimes, big and small, had occurred in and around the neighborhood—like most neighborhoods in America. If we didn't know about those crimes, how could we understand their aftermath, the way they affected us and those around us? The neighborhood was a living thing. Every assault altered the landscape.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Why would I?"

Later that night, when we were in bed and I was pretending to sleep, I sensed Rick watching me.

He whispered, "Something's wrong."

"Nothing's wrong."

"You used to talk to me."

"Do you expect me to tell you everything?"

"What happened? What's wrong?"

"Leave me alone."

When he reached for the light switch, I stilled his hand.

He slowly rose from the bed and began dressing in the dark. I heard him put on his boots and then walk down the stairs and out the front door. Then, I heard the motorcycle engine rev as it sped away. I waited, a little longer.

Rising from the bed, I slipped on my robe and sandals before exiting the house through the back door. I snuck behind the trees near the creek, where a woman with long dark hair was swinging in my swing.

When I heard the motorcycle approaching, I hid behind the trees. Rick parked the motorcycle in the driveway of the professor's house. He walked toward the front door and moved into an area blocked from my view. The next thing I knew, I saw him through the lit windows. Rick was inside the house, talking to the investor. He gestured wildly with his hands and the investor took notes on a clipboard. By now, the house had been gutted, the squirrels rudely evicted by exterminators, everything of value sold and carted away. All the trash—gnawed and tattered rugs, molded plush furniture, and a hammock—had been stacked on the exterior brick walls near the old charcoal grill and dismantled shelving. Rick motioned toward the ceiling, the walls, and finally toward the windows.

The woman in the swing stopped swinging. The twin girls behind her turned around and looked at me, their eyes glistening in the moonlight, mouths open. Innocent faces frozen in fear, uncertainty, or perhaps surprise, they had not uttered a sound. Even so, their mother must have sensed something. The infant began to

wail.

“Who’s there?” the woman asked, turning the ropes, twirling around in the swing. Twisting its ropes, she now faced me but perhaps couldn’t see me well enough in the dark to distinguish my features.

“Rick’s wife,” I said, stepping out of the tree shadows and into the moonlight. “You know Rick?”

“We used to live in the other house.”

“The motorcycle man’s house?” I asked, before realizing how callous and stupid the question would sound.

“He’s going to be all right, but I’ve been feeling strangely ever since our baby was born,” the woman said, gazing at me. “I keep thinking about the swing. I want to rock my baby in my swing. It helps. Did Rick tell you?”

“What?”

“I shouldn’t have come back.”

“You can swing here anytime. You don’t have to sneak around.”

“There was something wrong with Billy, wasn’t there?” She rose from the swing before leading the twins away. “I want to go back. But I’m afraid of Billy. He’s still here, isn’t he?”

After that night, Rick informed me that he and Billy had begun working for the investor full time. Rick became the investor’s right-hand man and Billy became Rick’s right hand, the two overseeing various renovation projects throughout town. When the investor bought another foreclosure in the neighborhood, they began remodeling it as well, painting over trespassers’ fingerprints in abandoned houses to create homes for new neighbors who had never known the old neighbors. ▲▼▲



Bayou Cane, Louisiana.
Photograph by Jeffrey Alfier.