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Hot Little Number

At first it seemed like nothing. In fact, they hardly noticed the wads of crumpled white paper that appeared every so often on the porch stairs or adrift in the yard like so many wiffleballs. And why would anyone think twice? The kids used the porch for everything when the weather was decent, and art projects tended to blow everywhere, construction paper pinned by the wind to the picket fence between the shivering lilacs and so on, and then one Saturday morning Eyan was out in his slippers retrieving the newspaper and incidentally another one of the crumpled balls when he observed that it was crawling with ants. Though some instinct sounded warning bells, he was already tugging the paper open despite himself and there in the middle was what the ants were unmistakably after, which was unmistakably a wad of semen. He tossed it away with a squeal, and after giving himself a moment to recover he used a fallen leaf to transport the crumpled, dampish ball to one of the wicker porch chairs, concealing it beneath an empty yogurt container.

The kids were already up, and it was a few minutes before he could pull Dora aside and describe his discovery. She paled. "Oh, you have got to be fucking kidding me," was her reply, because they both knew just who it was, who it absolutely had to be: their creepy nineteen-year-old neighbor, Martin Demsky.

"I left it on the porch. You want to see it?"

She did, emphatically so. Outside she knelt and with care lifted the yogurt container. "Oh, gross, *ants*? What the *fuck*."

He shivered again at having touched the thing. "Yeah. I've been picking these things up for—"

What, weeks? Months?

The Demskys' porch was barely twenty feet away, the next door down. Side by side their houses faced Mangano Avenue, their houses nearly twins, older wood-framed houses just south of campus, one blue, one gray, a tranquil neighborhood not quite two blocks from the elementary school, orderly, sedate, mostly teachers and professors on their side, doctors and lawyers across the street where the houses were bigger, everyone in their place but the three Demskys—Murray and Iris, and the son, Martin—who fit nowhere: sickly, hunched, angry, obscene, hoarding weirdos, who, it could be stated categorically, had not taken down their artificial Christmas tree in seven years.

And so Evan and Dora considered their options.

Evan's first thought was of course to go over and pound on the screen door and lift the stinking, reeking mess into Martin Dempsky's narrow, sinister, Oswaldian face and let him have it. This *your*, motherfucker? Recognize *this*? But experience suggested that such forward action would earn him only one of Martin's eerie, empty, vampiric stares, or that—worse—Martin would respond via something much grosser, as when one afternoon some months ago he had eased into the driveway between their houses with his dashboard covered with *Hustlers* and *Penthouses* all open to the centerfolds and had spent an hour there in his car, offering this treat up for Dora, who had just been sitting on the porch trying to read, albeit displaying her long legs and luscious (it had to be said) bod and numbling dark hair.

Oh, he was a creep.

"So," Evan said. "We should keep this, I guess."

"Freezer," Dora grimaced. "Evidence."

The first thing to do was to say nothing to anyone, it was decided, because inevitably the kids would get wind of what was going on, and how could any of this be explained? Dora, looking the way she did, had plenty of experience with sickos, and with one living right next door, and a volatile one at that, they decided their best strategy would be to catch the fucker in the act. So that afternoon Evan made a tour of the big box stores and came home with a three-camera home security setup that recorded all activity to a cloud-based hard drive and whose live camera feed could be monitored from their phones, and the next morning, after the kids had left for school but before he had to reach that afternoon, he mounted the cameras, one outside their bedroom window looking down on the driveway and two on the front porch, tucked into the bicycles so they looked like reflectors.

The problem was that the camera outside their bedroom window was just very plainly a camera, and from the Dempsky's house, naturally, it had been impossible to miss his hour of wrestling with the screen and, for god's sake, using his power drill to drive screws into the shingles before aiming the unit exactly at the Dempsky's driveway. Evan felt it best not to describe to Dora exactly how long it had taken him to do this, and how conspicuous he had been, but that night she cast one hooded look at the thing and said, "Well, *that's* pretty obvious, isn't it?"

"I guess."

She considered him. "I thought we were going to try to be subtle."

Evan had no answer exactly, only that once he'd begun, once he'd opened the window and looked down at the grass between their house and the Dempsky's, he had more or less sensed the Dempsky's as a group observing him from behind their Venetian blinds, and, all subterfuge lost, Evan had seen no choice but to proceed with his ridiculous project. This was in fact a fairly typical MO for him, his efforts arising from good intentions but featuring sub-par execution, this often being the result of not taking two goddamned seconds to consider the possible outcomes. This tendency had been the subject of so many marital discussions that neither now felt the need to say anything further. He had only wanted to protect them! But he had perhaps done the opposite, tipped their hand without gathering any useful further evidence. At any rate, for the next seven nights the cameras recorded nothing of any interest aside from a raccoon who walked with stately poise straight down the center of the sidewalk before he paused at the corner, looked both ways before using the crosswalk, and slipped like a shadow into the storm drain.

In spite of this, or by contrast, their move to this little college city north of Seattle had, for the most part, been going well. Two years they'd been here. They'd made quick friends in town, and Dora had been hired as a fundraiser for an environmental organization whose current project involved the assisted migration of endangered frog species, which meant that on these spring weekends they could outfit the kids in rubber boots and slickers and follow a crew of volunteers into the muck of a local pond where they would guide the kicking, wriggling creatures into plastic baggies for relocation. The frogs, calmed by the rocking dark of the organization's van, were transported three hundred miles north, into British Columbia. Too warm down here now, too much rain at the wrong times, the mating cycles thrown off by hormones in the groundwater, the usual litany of unmanageable conditions. But this was something they could do, small as it was. And almost daily Dora would return from work bursting with successes. People wanted to give their money away! They wanted something to be done! It was good to feel one was fighting against the largest enemy possible, at least, and she was.

And it was a good marriage, on balance, in that they both tended to take the long view of things. His impulsiveness could be forgiven, as could her frequent bouts of foul temper, each recognizing that these traits arose from their own screwy individual histories. Each felt they had made their own way in the world against certain odds and had, very fortunately, found

one another, that the daily abrasion of kids and work and the world's general fuckery could be borne because they had each individually borne everything to this point, and now they each had a companion with whom to bear it, who could assume some of the burden. Medication had helped them both lately, too, for Evan a new thing: the very day after beginning a new antidepressant he had been shocked, really shocked, by a flood of well-being that he knew was generated by a shift in brain chemistry but which seemed to originate instead from the world itself, the greening northwest spring, the warming comfort of the lower atmosphere and its streets of traveling cloud, the trickling gutters and pervasive birdsong. The feeling had passed in a long moment, a phoenix in flight, the rarest of creatures, and had not returned. But it had reset him, too, lifted him in a moment to a higher vantage. He pictured his mind, his soul, whatever, as occupying a space like the rabbit hole in *Alice in Wonderland*, a nearly infinite vertical corridor along whose walls were positioned various handholds and resting places. The longer he could rest somewhere, the longer it would take him to reach bottom, whatever reaching bottom might eventually mean. And maybe once in a while he could even find himself floating a little bit upward, too, toward the light.

The kids were seven and four, Allison and Scott. Charming, exhausting, better than their parents already, purer beings to be sure.

So where others might have panicked or reacted with unmeasured outrage, he and Dora found they could take a more patient approach to Martin Demsky's jizzwads. They took down the cameras. And they waited.

The spring bloomed, the summer sailed in. Hot, hotter, suffocating. A gauzy film hung suspended in the trees. Over ninety degrees for days in a row, the cars sprawled in misery on the basement floor. The Demskys' Christmas tree could be seen accepting the slanting rays of evening sun. In the mornings before the worst heat, Iris Demsky, a grained gray gnome, roamed the backyard perfuming the air with her cigarettes.

Every morning they scanned the yard for new crumpled paper balls, and found none.

"Maybe we scared him off, actually," Evan proposed.

"Maybe," Dora agreed.

But still, there he was, right next door. It was hardly any comfort. They kept the kids in sight at all times. Accompanied them to the park, stood on the blazing sidewalk and watched them steer their scooters up and down the block. Martin Demsky kept strange, erratic hours, rising at noon to appear

on the tiny upstairs balcony overlooking the street, sunken-chested, swallow-eyed, in t-shirt and basketball shorts. Never even glancing in their direction.

It wasn't hard to gather neighborhood stories about him from the days before Evan and Dora had arrived. One drunken night a few years ago, Martin Demsky made his marauding way up Mangano Avenue, banging on every door demanding to be admitted before finally finding his own house and plunging through the front door, shouting with rage. Fistfights between him and his father, Murray, on the front porch. There were rumors of another son, one who never visited but who lived across town in some festerous apartment.

"That family," people said, "they're—especially Martin—even when he was a little kid he was—just—"

What?

Off, was the word.

"No wonder we could get the house so cheap!" Evan said.

"Well, they can't live forever, maybe," one neighbor suggested.

"Although I guess they already have, so."

"They'll never move," another said. "Not until the parents die and Martin can sell the place."

"Maybe Martin'll kill them!" Evan crowed.

Nobody thought it was out of the question, actually.

The paper balls returned at the peak of summer. The first was placed insolently in the exact middle of the front walk by a fastidious hand and was already coated with ants at six in the morning. The next, just two days later, was nestled in the grass directly beneath their bedroom window, on a plumb line from where the camera had been. The fucker had been in their yard, had gazed up at the side of the house, at the milky sheet of their firmly closed blind, and made his calculation.

A third, a week later, was positioned on the bottom step of the porch.

A threat, this had to be. Martin Demsky could get as close as he wanted, and what could they do?

"I'm going to fucking *kill* him," Evan said.

"We have to catch him first."

Call the police? They did. But the police couldn't stake out the house, couldn't post someone there for hours overnight. "We'll send a car down the street, though," they promised.

"Okay, sure, but how often?"

A few times a night was all they could manage.

"Can you run, like, a DNA test on one of his—deposits?"

"You have one?"

"In our freezer." Buried deep in a sheath of tinfoil, ready to be handed over.

"Uh-huh. I don't think we do that. Anyway, you'd need to catch him in the act, wouldn't you?"

"I don't know!" he cried. "You're the police!"

A sigh on the other end of the line. "You might try a private detective."

Well, they'd try anything. The police offered names from a list. But it was impossible: an overnight stakeout cost five hundred dollars. Per night. There was no way. They'd be broke in a week.

But they could stake out their *own* front yard, take turns staying up until morning.

So they moved a kitchen stool into the living room, and Dora placed herself on it the first night, knitting a scarf for the unimaginable winter ahead and listening to the CBC through her earbuds and watching as the sidewalk lay in vacant repose, hour after hour, until the light began to seep into the trees and she returned, exhausted, whimpering, to bed. The next night it was his turn, and he arranged himself on the stool and watched the yard, resenting the feeling of being under siege, of protecting his family from a creeping evil, and an impatience, too, and an anger that they should be reduced to this, that having done nothing wrong they were nonetheless subject to this ordeal. Rip his throat out with a claw hammer. Press his head into the sidewalk and just keep pressing until it pops. They kept this routine up for two weeks and, when nothing appeared and they had both been drawn thin and threadbare, they agreed to stop, just for a few days.

And the next day another crumpled wad appeared, this time on the porch itself, which suggested to them that somehow Martin Demsky could see them, could tell when they were watching and when they weren't. It was impossible—they had taken every precaution to hide themselves. And yet.

"Maybe *I'm* doing it secretly," Evan proposed. "Maybe I'm sleepwalking and leaving my wads out there. Sleepjacking."

"Okay."

"I'm not totally joking," he said. He wasn't, not quite.

Dora only eyed him wearily.

They began to tell the story to friends and colleagues, always out of earshot of the children. It always caused a stir, because it was terrible, it was disgusting, it was unimaginable. Evan learned how to pitch the information so people wouldn't, in fact, react with naked horror, wouldn't insist

immediately that he return to the police and demand their help. He tried to make the story, sometimes, funny. But it wasn't funny, not at all.

Really, they were at a loss.

Then something happened that no one expected, and which turned everything on its head.

Like the houses on their side of Mangano Avenue, the houses on the other side—the bigger houses, where the doctors and lawyers lived—were mostly separated by double driveways, a total distance of some twenty-five feet. Almost directly across the street were the Jacobsons. Matt Jacobson was an internist, tall and handsome, blonde, with the rangy muscularity of the college rower he had been. His wife, Sylvia, was almost as tall, just as blond, and there were three Jacobson children, two daughters and a son: Holly, Tina, and Howie. Holly was eleven, Tina was nine, Howie was four.

Next to the Jacobsons lived Dr. and Mrs. Philport.

Lou Philport was in his sixties, a bowling pin of a man with a close-trimmed beard and the energetic waddling gait of a penguin. He was everyone's pediatrician, including Allison's and Scott's. For decades he had doctorated every child in the neighborhood, working out of a practice a mile away, near the shopping mall.

Lucy Philport was her husband's age, with bright grandmotherly cheeks and an addled, distracted air in conversation, as though she had forgotten something she was about to say, possibly the case as it was generally agreed that she had never quite recovered from a car crash the Philports had been in a decade ago, in which she'd received a severe concussion.

Because of the proximity of the houses to one another, one could look easily from one house into another. For this reason families tended to keep their blinds drawn, as the Jacobsons did.

Nonetheless—

(The news passed like a shot through the neighborhood.)

Nonetheless it was the case that Dr. Lou Philport had been arrested because he had been caught peeping at the eleven-year-old Holly Jacobson while she changed. The peeping was recorded by Sylvia Jacobson, who had noticed something one night and decided to try to catch Philport in the act.

In Sylvia Jacobson's video, taken from the Jacobsons' bathroom, Lou Philport could be seen parting his blinds with one hand. With the other hand he was observed to reach into his sweatpants and rummage around in a familiar manner. The video went on for some forty-five seconds until Dr. Philport appeared to finish his task, at which point he turned away abruptly

and vanished.

It was all online, all there for anyone to see.

The Jacobsons' curtains, evidently, were somewhat transparent.

Holly Jacobson was, of course, one of Dr. Philport's young patients.

It was all too shocking, horrible. For two long days after the news broke, the Jacobsons did not emerge from their house. A few visitors, well-wishers, family, were the only ones seen entering or leaving. Mrs. Philport, seemingly more addled than ever, did not appear to understand the seriousness of what had happened. Or, as some believed, she had willed herself into a blind unknowingness. Whatever it was: she sat friendless on the Philports' front porch, airing her empty smile to the street.

And now the question became, for Evan and Dora: what to do with what they knew?

Because now it was clear that after all it had not been creepy Martin Demsky masturbating in tribute to the voluptuous, leggy, magnificent Dora. No, it had been Dr. Lou Philport, and he had been masturbating in tribute to their seven-year-old daughter Allison, whose body he had inspected during her annual exam, his stubby fingers roaming over her throat, into her armpits, prodding her dormant chest, squeezing her legs, her hips and thighs. Judging her suitability. It had been Dr. Lou Philport leaving his wet wads around the yard, maybe in hopes that Allison might pick one up. Watching from across the street as Evan collected them, bagged them, discarded them. Resolving to try again. Observing them, maybe through binoculars, as they sat on their stools, waiting for Martin Demsky. Knowing when they were asleep.

It was horrible.

Evan experienced, very vividly, the urge to run across the street and crush Philport's windpipe between his thumbs. Feel that bristly beard caving in. But Philport was already locked up awaiting his hearing, out of reach.

So: now what?

Was it better to call the police again, to remind them of the complaints he and Dora had filed, to suggest that there must be a connection between the two cases?

But if they did that, then what?

Then they, or the police, would have to ask sweet, perfect Allison, she of the flowing amber curls, the bright button eyes, whether Dr. Philport had ever—

He *hadn't*, he and Dora had discussed it the moment they heard. No,

they'd been in the room during every examination. But they'd have to ask—

Or explain. Or something.

Had they got a creepy vibe off of Dr. Philport?

A little, maybe? But maybe just in retrospect he seemed a little too attentive, a little too—what? Familiar, possibly.

No, they'd missed it entirely at the time.

And so they asked themselves: what would normal parents do in this situation? Because, as they had both acknowledged, they were decidedly *not* normal parents, as in, without useful examples of their own to draw from, i.e., from an early age Dora had been beaten savagely by her father, once breaking her front teeth off against the bathroom sink, and later, like so many women, she had been assaulted as a teenager, but her parents had refused to act, her mother turning rigid when Dora asked for help and when Dora had offered over the photograph of the man who'd done the assaulting, her mother had refused to meet her eyes while ripping the photograph in half and saying, "I don't want to hear anything about this!" Thus: you're on your own. And Evan's impulses always untrustworthy, too much or too little, the result of being raised by a mother whose emotional life was a constant battle against feeling, for once she felt something how could she ever stop?

Who knew how to handle this? Nobody, maybe. But definitely not them.

On the other hand, the worst, surely, was over. For now, they could safely do nothing.

The summer went on, searing the sky.

One other uncomfortable truth, and this no one mentioned at all, because it was beside the point, really, or at least mostly, was that, objectively speaking, eleven-year-old Holly Jacobson was sort of a hot little number. No one said a word about it. But when the news first broke you could observe this fact registering on people's faces. And then you could see this fact being just as visibly, forcefully, dismissed. No excuse, of course. You could not say an eleven-year-old had brought on her own peeping tom. But—well, there it was, in everyone, that flash of embarrassed recognition. Flirty, sort of, if that was the right way to phrase it, and very pretty as well, clear skin and big brown eyes, lithe and prancy as she catapulted herself down the sidewalk. A string of boyfriends trailing her home from sixth grade. Twice she had met Evan's glance from across the street and held it just a fraction longer than might be expected, her gaze asking what such a gaze always asked: Who am

I? What do I look like in your eyes?

The question then being—well, *that* sort of behavior wasn't quite *normal*, was it? In fact wasn't it maybe just the faintest suggestion of some prior abuse?

Dora said, "Oh, who knows? Maybe."

"Or maybe that's just who she is, just normally."

Dora gave a huff. "Actually what she is is *mean*. She's a mean girl. *All* those Jacobson kids are awful." This was news to him, but Dora would have heard stories that he'd missed. "Nor that you'd wish what happened to her on anybody, obviously."

A hard note in this, surprising him. So, something here attached to something else he couldn't see, and so, possibly, a chance to probe a little into his wife's past. He still had only a general sense of her own history in this area. What had actually been done to her. How often and by whom. Or, more accurately, he had been given a version of her history so long ago that some of its details had frankly faded, and also, to be fair, the history she'd provided had been offered before they'd truly known one another, before they were married. There was still more for him to find out, and some of it, he was fairly sure, had some application to the question of Dr. Philport.

But on this, of all matters, he did not like to press. He waited for more from Dora, and when it didn't come, he let the moment go.

Lou Philport accepted a plea deal: eight years' probation, the loss of his medical license, and he and Lucy were required to move, because Dr. Philport could not live within five hundred yards of either his victim or an elementary school. His clinic fired him. One of the Philports' adult children, a heavily bearded son, returned from Virginia to help them box up the house, which was soon put up for sale. After months of speculation about how far Dr. Philport would go—how many states away he would finally settle—he bought a house less than a mile away, igniting a further outrage. Did he not have the decency to just disappear? But of course not. He had no decency whatsoever. None at all.

A year later, the Jacobsons moved across town in the other direction. The scandal loomed large, and then, with time, after its principals left the neighborhood, receded in memory. Dr. Philport was replaced at the clinic by Dr. Shelby Simms, who was funnier, skinnier, younger, and obviously no threat at all. When it seemed right, Evan and Dora mentioned at dinner, to the kids, in an offhand way, why Dr. Philport had been

fired—a version of the story that made Dr. Philport into just a peeping tom. Leaving out him masturbating at his window. Even so the information was greeted with wrinkles of disgust and puzzlement. A small, unplaceable shock, too, that someone would do this—would for some reason *want* to. It made no sense to either of them. And maybe because of this, they were both, mostly, able to forget about it.

"Weird," was Allison's only comment.

Still untold, maybe forever: the damp white paper balls, all the former suspicions concerning Martin Demsky, their long nights on the kitchen stool staring blindly into the empty dark. Those feelings of anger and despair and helplessness. And the terrible recognition that the target had been Allison all along. Something they could never disclose.

The neighborhood flurried, settled, regathered. New people moved in where the Jacobsons and Demskys had been, and the story faded and faded.

It was not until long after all these events came to pass that everything shifted again for Evan and Dora—shifted forever, in a sense—in that Dora began, very calmly and with a great show of bravery, over the course of a few days—nights, really—telling him everything that had happened to her, in every detail and nuance. All she could remember, anyway.

This time he listened carefully, asking questions. Wanting clarifications. His own show, maybe, of bravery. Or something like it.

She was afraid, she told him, that he would see her differently after he knew what there was to know.

He was afraid of the same thing. But he didn't want to say so. He held his tongue.

They were in bed, the window open behind their heads, the summer pressing through the screen, the racking of the Demskys' air conditioning, the chirping insects. It had rained that afternoon, and the lawn was marshy. Then he said, "Actually, I'm a little afraid of that, too."

She turned to him in bed—

(It occurred to them both that there were frogs in the garden beneath their window, making their hopeful peepings.)
She turned to him in bed, and continued.