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SHADOWS & TALL TREES

EDITED BY
MICHAEL
K E L L Y

UP UNDERTOW
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of the way when Glenda was parking. She had not been anywhere since the previous weekend, when she went to fetch that weedkiller.

She stood at the kerb, trying to remember what she had come outside for. There was no point driving over to Fiona's house: the group had dissolved.

Glenda's placard was still propped against the front wall. She picked it up, looking at the faded lettering: WE WANT ANSWERS! Had she written that? It did not sound like her, like something she would say. Perhaps she had got somebody else's placard by mistake. She stood on the pavement, near the kerb. She could see the factory chimney in the distance, down by the river, belching its mustard smoke into the sky. Dougie would be taking his lunch break soon. She could walk down there and try to see him, see if he was feeling any better. If she found, on the way, that she did not want to keep carrying the placard, which may or may not have been hers, she could just leave it somewhere.

She stepped into the road, with the sign hanging down, the message (WE WANT ANSWERS!) dangling in the gutter. She moved out into the road, slowly, as if she were stepping through the mud at the edge of the river, mud in which Dougie had seen fish lying belly up.

She did have a sense of the size and weight of the vehicle that was coming towards her. She was not oblivious to the juggernaut that was bearing down on her. But it felt more peripheral, more distant, than it was. She was moving forward, looking towards the far side of the road, but with no great sense of urgency.



CURB DAY

Rebecca Kuder

EACH YEAR IN MAY, WE MUST HAUL A ghastly number of items to the curb. It's mandatory. For years now. We don't even question it anymore.

They start collecting the third Friday at dawn. They start at a different house each year. No one knows how they choose. We have to be ready. We have to produce. They measure what we put out.

I hate the scramble. Stacks and boxes and cabinets to paddle through. I need to touch each scrap, have a conversation before discarding. I promised myself I would start early this year: the bottom of the house, because that's where time and gravity rule the world of accumulation. In the basement last Thursday, I unfurled three new bags, thinking it would be easier to add scraps as I found them. Into one bag I tossed parts of several broken coffeemakers full of mealy dust, a chipped mixing bowl, two ancient light fixtures that will never shine again, and reams of disintegrating-rubber-band-wrapped greeting cards from when I was a child and forced by Mother to write too many thank you notes (those whimsical bunnies, kittens, now greeting no one).

Despite all this gathering, I still need more.

On the basement shelves last Friday, I found a box marked *fragile*. Grandmother's handwriting. As I opened it, the box flut-tered apart. Inside I found stained lace curtains used as padding. I unwrapped them and extracted the first treasure: a Depression glass refrigerator dish. Grandmother kept butter in it. For nearly thirty minutes, I held the dish. Its lid is chipped. I don't use it, clearly. Into the trash bag nest it went, with the padding. In a rush of energy, I opened another box and found several bottles of Dickinson's Witch Hazel. One still had a lick of amber in the bottom. I held this bottle even longer than the butter dish. Finally, I opened the bottle, its corroded metal lid snowing bits of rust on my lap, and inhaled. Grandmother . . . long-dead . . . set-ting her hair, cotton balls of witch hazel baptizing strands of silver, twirling hair and pinning the pin curl clips . . . Next, her ancient Noxzema jar, with a layer of cracked white glazing at the bottom. The things that she touched and used. The invisible backdrop to her days. The second bag would wait. I stopped to fix lunch.

The light fixture and butter dish bag waits at the foot of the basement steps. I've been tripping over it since I left it there last week. The object (trash bag) becomes an action (trip), becomes more and also less than what it actually is. The bag is no longer a bag. What it actually *is* shifts, is another way of putting it.

All this tripping over bags. You would think I'd just stop going down there, but the yearly collection won't allow me to avoid a single corner of this gaping house. So much for starting early. Before I bring *that* bag to the curb I will have to peer inside again and confirm I can jettison the contents. Must double-check. Starting early only makes more work.

I had a visit from the local government. They knocked at the door, said they want us to produce at least a third, *one whole third* more than last year. Hard to fathom how. Last year was brutal.

Last year I put out three bags and still earned a caution notice. But the more we produce, so they claim, the safer we are, and the less they will bother us. The less they will come knocking at the door, faces full of cheer, plastic-framed mouths buttering us as if we are warm toast. *Oh, excuse me, but in searching our records, we find that historically, you haven't put out enough. Our records indicate that last year, you didn't seem to be in earnest. This is your complimentary warning. We assume you plan to endure?* Words spoken in that tone of buttering, nothing in writing. I have looked in several of the mirrors recently. Behold, I am not warm toast. I am human. The plastic butter-ghosts stood on my porch with their knives to spread spread spread buttered requests and warnings, as if all we live for is to lug out some ever-increasing amount. Each year there is math, and each year the only thing that accumulates is my unwanted. Now, a fourth bag?

No one objects or complains. And with what we've seen, why should we? We follow rules and drag, drag it all to the curb. But I worry there might be something in those bags that I will need again. Some wire, some lace. Can't some of it stay in my house? Deciding what to expel is excruciating. I spent yesterday hunting an appliance until I remembered I had bagged it last year; it's gone. How will it be possible to find enough?

I have been moving up and down flights of stairs all morning. Up, down. I go to the basement. Groping through the butter dish bag, something sharp bites my hand, rips the bag. The flimsy membrane of the bag won't hold it. Why do I always buy such cheap bags? Mr. Warner next door—his bags are ridiculously sturdy. No one on our street produces like Mr. Warner does. He walks from house to curb carrying two at a time, off the ground. No dragging, not for Mr. Warner. An optimist. Yesterday I heard him whistling! Something from the '50s. Those bags of his are big enough to hold a dog's carcass, a wet one. A wet dog's carcass, I tell you. I tell you I'm going to *take* one of his bags. He puts them out days ahead, no fear of anyone taking one or two; he has