

“The Parcel”

Sandy went to the cabinet and swallowed the pill that would make her outing okay. As she waited for the medicine to work, she tugged on a sweater, combed her greying hair, and tied the laces on her shoes into three knots each. Then Sandy paced her quiet home, pulling back the blinds to see onto the street, flinching every time a runner or cyclist or skateboarder crept into her periphery, quickly drawing the blinds closed if they appeared to be looking her way. She sunk into her chair, stood, then sunk again, rocking forward and back until the pill finally smothered her anxiety enough to go outside for the first time in weeks. She flipped three deadbolts, slid two chains, and opened six padlocks before inching into the cool afternoon air. The thrill made work of her hands and she was slow and sloppy trying to secure the door, shuddering until it was done, and she was in her car.

Outside, her neighbour waved. Sandy looked away, driving on and thinking about the one that almost took her. He'd been quick and strong, striking out, clawing and kicking with the well-oiled muscles of a working man. His hushed threats hot on her face, Sandy fought. He'd had a bag slung around his neck and he used it against her, flipping it at Sandy's face, whipping it against her legs, tripping her feet with the heavy loop and soon they were half-blind in an insect cloud of paper, rolling along the sidewalk in the half-black of dawn. Something blue fell away and then Sandy was stepping on his headphones, unable to control their spill as he lashed at her eyes, her throat, and the delicate membranes of her temples. She didn't cry *thief* or *rape* or *help*. Instead, she chopped and hacked, using the bruising weight of her shoulders to go, go, go against the man, pushing and crushing until his bag was dropped and he finally submitted in a motionless, bloody slump.

Sandy pulled into the drugstore parking lot, touching her lips where the man's lips once were, then left her car, where it beeped three times. She slid into the line at the post office at the back of the drug store, gripping her purse, feeling the comforting indentations of the can of pepper spray in the leather. Five people in front of her. Then four. The third went on much too long and she felt many eyes gawking at her from over the checkout stands and through the aisles of potato chips and soda pop and between the tops of the magazine stands. She counted in her head. She bit her lip and sucked at her cheek, shuffling her feet until the man behind her coughed and then Sandy stood stock still.

The line moved and then Sandy had to engage with the man behind the counter. She gave him the package slip and the man clicked something into his computer and asked Sandy for identification. *He wants to know where I live*, she thought. She hesitated, picturing him in the dark corners of her house on a quiet night, reaching for her neck...

"Something wrong, ma'am?" the clerk asked.

Was there? She asked herself. Sandy slid her hand into her purse and drew out her wallet, flipping it open toward the clerk. He looked at her driver's licence, running his fingers over the letters in her name, the numbers in her address, lingering a little too long on the face that declared her spinsterhood until Sandy cleared her throat. The clerk shrugged, departed behind a swinging door, and returned with a box with Sandy's name on it. She tucked it under her arm and counted the floor tiles on her way out of the store.

Sandy swept the great bulk of her body back into her car, fast, faster until she was out of breath just checking the back seat and the locks, collapsing on her seat with a heave of relief. She continued home along the side streets and backroads and vacant alleys until her suburb opened before her with a flowering of children and unleashed pets. Sandy slowed into her driveway

where, outside, her neighbor was mowing the lawn. She glimpsed down, collecting her purse and the package. She exited the car and silently scrambled through her outside locks and then rushed through her inside locks before deflating once again in her armchair.

When her heart stopped thundering and her breath stopped blasting—a thud from the basement.

Sandy vaulted from her seat, rushed to her knife block and stood before her basement door. Something moved down there. She flipped on the light and took the stairs three at a time, stopping to listen to the thing that was moving, breathing, lurking. Another step and Sandy was on her basement floor overlooking the spare bed set in the middle of the room. There, blood.

And her mailman.

He had managed to release one of his restraints and his leg was thrashing about the bed, kicking out at her as she neared him. Sandy brought the knife to her lips, “Shhhh,” she said quietly. She had never been good at talking and no one had ever been good at talking to her. The bloom of their embarrassment always came quickly, a word or two, then a look at Sandy’s big shoulders and thick knees and long chin and, well, no more words came after that. But with the man on her bed, Sandy could say anything. Anything at all.

“I got you a new pair of headphones today,” she said, and her mailman began to cry.