

two, then called to see if she planned to come in. She resigned over the phone and was sure Jim's sigh signaled relief. After that, Marty started calling the SuperShop to deliver her groceries. It was amazing to find she really didn't need to leave the house at all, although the delivery boys from the market were often late or clumsy. Sometimes her order would be incomplete, but at least the store never charged her for what they didn't send.

When Marty stopped leaving the house, she also stopped changing into street clothes every day. She knew other people would find that odd, so she stopped bringing in mail until the following morning when she went out early for the newspaper. Neighbors never saw the woman in strange, puffy slippers and oddly padded robe who left the house for those brief moments every day. As the neighborhood changed over the years, George and Marty never connected with young couples who moved in around them. For one thing, Marty didn't like the camp trailer the family next door parked in their driveway.

Can't they see that thing blocks my view down to the corner? Why do they think I'd prefer a view of their metal box in place of a tree? I guess it's not as bad as those brats across the street who destroyed my front flower beds. Why wouldn't George sell this place and move into a condo after our kids were grown?

The silvery filaments draped every doorway in the house by November. Sometimes Marty couldn't avoid getting some of the stuff stuck on her lips. When she tried to clear it away, making little spitting noises with

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her tongue, she noticed it was sweet at first but had a bitter aftertaste that lingered. The tendrils drooped from the hem of her robe and wound about her legs when she walked. Marty was fascinated yet repelled by its gentle stickiness, like cotton candy.

The recliner Marty sat in to read or watch TV began to accumulate the webbing in its upholstered folds. She didn't always get up from the chair at night anymore...just fell asleep there after the late news. She moved the telephone base to a table by her chair and stashed some snacks in a basket below it for those days she didn't feel like getting up at all.

Marissa worried about her mother. Sometimes, Marty didn't answer or return phone calls. If Marissa asked later where she'd been, Marty always insisted she hadn't been out, just couldn't get to the phone. Explanations were vague. Marissa made plans to bring a friend and everything needed for Thanksgiving dinner; Marty shouldn't do anything.

How thoughtful. She couldn't be bothered to come and help me clean up this mess, and now that I can hardly get out of my chair, she tells me not to do anything. As if I could.

Friday before Thanksgiving was the last day Marty answered Marissa's call. Sunday morning when Marty woke up, her left sleeve was woven to the arm of the recliner by the accumulation of silver webbing. She thought about calling Marissa. She could almost reach the phone, but she was tired. There was a bottle of water with her in the recliner and Marty managed to get

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a drink. She couldn't reach a cracker or packet of raisins from her basket.

Marissa called again on Tuesday and got the machine. She was working overtime to have a couple of days off for the holiday and pushed her concerns to the back of her mind. She had watched her mother grow bitter after Alan's death and kept a distance to avoid the poison Marty often spilled out. After George died, Marissa felt an obligation to be a more attentive daughter but she was glad to have the excuse of her job and a two-hour stretch of highway to keep from being dragged into her mother's constant grievances. She tried talking to Marty about it once, suggesting her mother let go of some of the grudges she carried. Marty bristled at the idea she might not be completely justified in feeling mistreated, or at least slighted, by everyone she complained about. She pouted the rest of that day and refused to return Marissa's calls for a month. If she had known Marissa considered it a welcome breather, Marty would have been enraged.

Marty hardly heard her daughter's Tuesday call. She was very tired. The ringing of the phone and Marissa's voice on the answering machine seemed far away. She could not open her eyes to tell if it was morning or evening. She tried to lift the bottle of water and found her right sleeve was now in the grip of the webbing surrounding the chair. By the time the delivery boy from the SuperShop banged on the door, Marty understood she was finally, completely, enveloped by the softly sticky threads. She knew, too, helplessly, belatedly, that she had woven her own shroud. Her lips barely parted to form an involuntary "Oh!" of insight. With the sharp

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intake of breath, she felt the filaments fill her mouth and

nostrils.

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## Guardian

When I heard the pulsing whine of fire sirens weaving through my brain, the full pattern of the day finally became clear. It started this morning when I was sitting at the intersection of South First and Treadaway, wondering if I had ever made a green light there on my way to work. At least the billboard ahead changes every couple of months. This week it says, “Guardian Home Security Systems,” and shows a house wrapped in chains with a big padlock. Anderson isn’t a big city, but it has its share of crime, and I wondered if my wife Katherine and I should get a security system. We don’t have a lot of stuff a break-in artist would want – the laptops, maybe the TV.

When the light changed, I turned left and found myself behind a tire shop van. The logo showed a car being carried by four angels. “Trusty Treads: We Keep You Safe.” I thought about the spot on my left front tire that’s wearing unevenly.

In the parking lot behind the office, I put on the emergency brake and clicked the lock on my ten-year-old sedan. A decal on the back window caught my eye: “Saf-T-Glass®.” My brain started stirring bits of the morning together into a stew. Safety. Security. Warning labels on everything. Lots of them responses to people who sued manufacturers because they didn’t have

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good sense themselves. Nobody's going to keep you safe. Got to look out for yourself. The world's a dangerous place.

I stopped the train of thought before it could take me to the little house on Cedar Street where we were living when Dad left. In the Parkview Business Suites, I picked up mail and sorted it as I headed to Merkel Accounting. Mostly junk mail, including a full-color flyer from the Guardian Home Security outfit I'd seen on the billboard earlier. They advertised fire alarms, carbon monoxide and smoke detectors, along with break-in alarms.

That flyer really sent me back to Cedar Street – the time my brother Carl and I almost burned the house down when we draped an old scarf over a lamp so we could read in bed after lights out. Then we got up and sneaked into the living room to watch TV instead. Mom was sound asleep, always tired from working at the cafeteria to support two hungry boys. We didn't know it would be dangerous, fabric so close to the lightbulb.

Smoke started tickling our noses in the living room about the same time the scarf burst into flame. When we realized what was happening, we carried glasses and bowls of water from the kitchen and bathroom and tossed them into the fire. Mom woke up and beat out the flames with a throw rug.

The landlord was really mad about the burn marks on the windowsill and the scorched linoleum. Mom had to talk fast to keep us from being thrown out. Until then, I just knew she worked long hours and didn't have

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money for the kind of toys and clothes other kids had, but I hadn't realized how close to the edge we lived.

That's probably part of the reason I became an accountant – growing up counting every penny. I've thought about going out on my own lots of times. Even had clients tell me I should leave Merkel's and they'd follow me. I can see the name on the door alright – Ben Ward, C.P.A. I'm glad to have a steady job, but there's so much we could be doing more efficiently if Merkel would move into the twenty-first century and really go digital. Still, I'm not inclined to take on the risk of running my own shop – especially now that I have a wife to take care of; maybe a family one of these days.

Quarterly tax reports are due in a week and I had five accounts to work on today, including Anderson Lock and Key, Castle Rock Gates, and Safe Shield Glaziers. I thought again about the theme of "safety" that seemed to be popping up everywhere. I remember thinking I can play this game! and made a mental note to pick up some condoms on my way home.

I broke for lunch, but Merkel was working through again and wanted me to bring back a sandwich. Outside our suite was one of those collapsible orange signs warning "Caution. Wet floor." I avoided it but almost ran into the mop and bucket parked at the corner of the corridor. While I walked to the diner, the word "caution" played more games in my head: a big black crow cawed, "Shun the corned beef!" But I always do.

At the counter, I studied the menu while I waited, though I know most of it by heart. I noticed a box on the last page that never caught my eye before: "City of

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Anderson water supply safe for public consumption. Marvin Appleton, State Health Inspector.”

In the afternoon, a new client came in. Merkel sent her straight to me. “My associate, Ben Ward, will take care of you, Mrs. Covington. He’s very good; handles some of our most important accounts.”

Mrs. Covington has started a new business producing leashes for toddlers – bright yellow with black accents. Her logo is a fat bumblebee; the company name “Bee Safe.” She misunderstood my quizzical look. “It only looks cruel to people who’ve never tried to keep up with a three-year-old in a busy mall.” But I was just thinking, What’s up with all the safety stuff?

I did remember to get condoms on my way home, but only because Katherine called and asked me to stop for her allergy medicine. I strolled around DrugRite waiting for the prescription. The number of products that invoke the words “safe” or “safety” is amazing: medic alert jewelry, rubber-tipped canes, bathtub liners, buffered aspirin, baby shampoo....

By the time I got home, I was feeling anything but safe. I think the world feels more dangerous when you’re hounded all the time to “be safe.” I tried to settle down with a magazine before supper. The first page had a big sailing ship advertising Steady On Life and Health Insurance.

Somebody knocked and I wondered why whoever it was didn’t use the bell. The stranger had dark, wavy hair, softly draped tweed trousers and Italian loafers but

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he offered a strong hand. “Hi. I’m Angelo Guardi. You don’t know me but I know you. Please call your wife.”

I’m sure I scowled at him. I don’t like door-to-door salesmen and I wasn’t inclined to bother Katherine while she was trying to make dinner. The stranger stopped smiling. His voice became firmer but I didn’t feel threatened; I felt compelled by Angelo’s instructions. “It’s important, Mr. Ward.”

All of a sudden, I felt I had to get Katherine to the front of the house. I left the door open and ran to the kitchen. Katherine was pouring greens from a bag into salad bowls. I grabbed her hand. She was too surprised to resist when I pulled her to the living room.

The guy wasn’t at the door. I hurried Katherine out to the front walk. She had begun to babble irritated questions. I told her, “Just wait, Honey. We need to see what this guy says.”

Then, there was a muffled boom inside the house. Through the open door we saw flames pouring from the kitchen into the living room of the bungalow. Katherine screamed. I held her tightly as we moved away from the house.

I finally got it while we were waiting for the fire trucks. I found a business card on the sidewalk: Guardian Home Security Systems, Angelo Guardi, Licensed Representative. Everybody can use a little help sometimes.

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## Starry Night

When the sky is really dark, clear but not much moon, the stars take over the night. If you look across the I-220 bridge back at Shreveport from our little cove on the south shore of Cross Lake, you can feel like you're on the edge of Van Gogh's "Starry Night over the Rhone." Not that other "Starry Night," at the café, or the one with the village. Those are okay, but the starlight on the water does it for me.

I can't remember the first time I ever came out here. It was my uncle's fish camp and he and my dad used to bring me out here. Uncle Zach never married, so when he died, Dad got it. Now Dad's gone too and it's going to be mine. We could have sold it lots of times, especially after the fancy houses started going in a little ways east of here, but Zach and Dad didn't need the money. I could use some help with my student loans but I'd also like to hold on to the property.

I've loved the night view over the water, back to the bridge, all my life. When I was just a kid sometimes I'd squirrel away in my closet and think about that when Mom got to yelling, or later when she was sick and crying all the time. At night, after she had to go away and it was just Dad and me, I pretended, for a long time, I was camping out at the lake. I guess because she wasn't expected to be there I didn't miss her so much if

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I imagined I was at the lake, with the stars. And when I got bored in classes, I doodled the outline of that bridge or the vaulted arches underneath it, like a cathedral.

My French teacher had a lot of famous paintings as posters she rotated on her walls during the year. When “Starry Night over the Rhone” came up in October of my junior year in high school it was the first time I’d ever seen the Van Gogh and I couldn’t believe what I saw. It was my scene, looking over Cross Lake and the I-220 bridge. Even though Van Gogh was Dutch, “Starry Night over the Rhone” was a French location and I was hooked. I really got into French and amazed everybody, including myself, that I could make an A in something.

I soaked up everything I could about Van Gogh, too. Found out he might have been manic-depressive, like my mom. Or maybe just depressed, like me. The French club took a field trip to a Dallas museum for an exhibition of the impressionists and I got to see a couple of his lesser-known works, some portraits. In the museum gift shop there were postcards and posters of all the Starry Night paintings. I decided to skip supper at the restaurant on the way home so I could spend \$14.95 for a poster of “Starry Night over the Rhone” – a big commitment for a sixteen-year-old boy, even a nerd. I put it up in my room, but I never told Dad why I liked it so much. I don’t think he ever saw in it what I did.

About a year ago, when Dad had his heart attack, I came out to the camp after leaving the hospital because I really needed to get quiet on the inside. The doctors were already telling me it was a bad one and that Dad

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might not make it. It was a lot for a college kid with no close relatives and no real friends. I had taken Katie out a few times, but I didn't think she wanted to know about my family problems. Jimmy was the only one I might have talked to and he was out of town for his grandparents' anniversary. That night was the first time I got lost at the lake – that's what I called it.

Maybe I was disoriented, from worry or fatigue, but I know this acre of land like I know my bedroom. You pull off the parish road onto a little patch of gravel Zach and Dad spread themselves. Then you take a path worn down by our tramping through a stand of live oaks and pines and brush of various kinds. After 20, maybe 30 yards, you come out in a clearing next to the water and there's a little picnic shelter we built and the old dock where we keep a boat tied up. For a few years we had a storage shed on the property but kids or vagrants started breaking in and taking stuff. Somebody even camped there for a while one winter. We finally tore it down. Anyway, there's only one way in or out from the road, but I got lost on my way back to the car that night.

I checked my watch, so I remember it was about 11:00. When I came through the trees, my car was gone. I couldn't believe it. I didn't need that on top of having my dad maybe dying in the hospital and mid-terms coming up. I tromped on up to the parish road, or where it should have been, but there was just a dirt track. It was obviously worn down by a lot of traffic, but there was no sign of any paving. It freaked me out. I couldn't figure out how I could have gotten lost on my way from the lakeshore to the road, in a spot I knew as well as any place on earth.

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I stood there staring up and down the dirt road for a few minutes, trying to think what I was going to do next. My cell phone doesn't get good coverage out here and I doubted I could get a signal, even if I had someone to call. While I was standing there, I heard noises like from the sound track of an old Western, a creaky wagon being pulled by a horse. I stepped off the road and tried to blend in with the shadow of a pine tree.

I saw the light swaying first. When the wagon came into view, I could see the driver had a lantern hanging from a pole sticking up in the front corner of the wagon. He was talking to his horse a little, not too loud, and then he started singing, in French. I could make out a few words, but I didn't know the tune. Now, this is Louisiana, but not south Louisiana, and there aren't a bunch of people here who go around speaking French, even though we like to pretend we're all Cajun when we talk to people from Texas.

I waited until the wagon passed, then I turned to go back through the trees to the water. I don't know why. I guess it seemed like a safe thing, to go back to a familiar place, while I decided what to do.

From the picnic shelter I stared up at the path to the road and satisfied myself there really was only one way out. So I headed back to the gravel clearing again, and my car was parked right where I'd left it. I alternated between thinking Thank God I'm not crazy after all! and I must be going crazy, like Mom!

I drove home and slept like a rock. It was after Christmas before I had time to come back out to the lake. Dad got better for a while. I finished up the

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semester okay and started thinking about what I would do after graduation. Jimmy was planning to go to Ole Miss for a Master's in engineering. Katie was talking about a music school up north somewhere. I had a feeling she was fishing for me, or somebody, to ask her not to go, but I didn't have anything to offer her. There's not a whole lot you can do with a liberal arts degree, lots of French and history and no teaching certificate. I really don't want to teach.

Dad and I watched some bowl game the day after Christmas. He couldn't even stay awake through the third quarter. He was losing strength every day. When he got in bed about eight, I said I was going to see what Jimmy was doing, but came out here to the lake by myself instead. I wasn't feeling much like being with other people. It was one of the good nights – no moon, no clouds, and not too cold yet. We don't get much real winter in Shreveport. The stars were big as I've ever seen them, kind of flaring out, and there was a breeze that rippled the long reflections of city lights on the water, just like in the painting. I sat on the picnic table and stared out at the water for a long time. No expectations, no decisions to make; that's what I like about being here.

While I was staring, a sailboat came up to our dock. That's not too unusual. The yacht club is on the south side of the lake and lots of people like to sail Cross Lake at night. It's safe – no sand bars, no odd trees out in the middle. It was unusual that this boat wasn't carrying a light of any kind. Sort of appeared out of nowhere. A guy hopped out and tied up next to our little boat. Then things got weird. He helped a woman out of the boat

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and they started walking up the dock toward where I was. The woman was wearing a long, Victorian-era dress with a shawl. She had a hat tied on with a ribbon. I thought maybe they had been to some kind of costume party at the yacht club, but I couldn't figure out why they tied up at our place. The couple walked past me and made for the path to the road without acknowledging me. I heard them talking softly to each other in French.

Then I got it: the painting has a man and a woman and a couple of small sailboats in the foreground. I never paid much attention to that. The figures are very dark and they weren't part of my scene, my 'starry nights' – until then. I turned and watched the man and woman walk through the opening in the trees, then looked back at their boat bobbing at the end of our dock. I remember wondering if I should feel afraid, but I hadn't been feeling much of anything for quite a while. They didn't look like ghosts and there wasn't anything creepy about the pair anyway. I followed them up the path to the gravel clearing.

When I got there, my car was gone again, and so were the people I had followed. I remembered the wagon I had seen before, and wondered where the driver had come from and where he might have been going. I turned right onto the dirt road, the direction the wagon had traveled, and started walking. I had a vague idea that I'd find someone to talk to and figure out what was going on.

The wind came up a little bit and I turned up the collar of my coat, but it still wasn't too cold. It seemed

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like I walked a half-mile or so before I saw some low-roofed stone buildings. A few had light in the windows, but nothing that looked like electricity. It was definitely not the neon-lit bait store I'm used to seeing along there. That's when I thought, What the heck am I doing? and turned back, almost running toward the fish camp. My car was in the gravel clearing. I jumped in and drove home shaking.

I didn't come to the lake again for a couple of months after that. Tried not to think about what had happened those two nights that I "got lost." By March, Katie was going out with a guy from the music department and Jimmy had found the love of his life in a coffee shop near campus. Dad was in the last stages of heart failure. We were both just hoping he could hold on until graduation. I realized I would be losing my father and my school routine at about the same time.

I tried to stay busy during spring break working on a paper for my European history seminar, but I couldn't stay at the computer forever. I came out to the lake that Thursday night. On the way here, I started thinking about whether or not I wanted to "get lost" again. I thought about whether I had just wiggled out those two times or .... Or, what? I couldn't articulate what the alternative might be. And anyway, losing my mind was a more likely scenario, given my family history and my current stress. That night I fell asleep on the picnic table and didn't go back to my car until just before dawn; I didn't "get lost."

Jimmy got married after graduation and took his new wife along for grad school at Ole Miss. I don't know

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what happened to Katie. I got invited to work as a graduate assistant in the history department and it seemed like as good a plan as any. Dad didn't die until July, but he wasn't able to make it to the graduation ceremony.

After that, I started coming out to the lake about once a week. I've never seen the couple with the sailboat again, but when the night is just right, my car will be gone when I first go up the path to the road. Usually, I just go back down to the picnic table and start over again and everything's straight. A couple of times I walked up the dirt road to the village again. Once, I moved in close to one of the little houses and listened to the people inside talking in French. Last night I heard the wagon on the road again.

I've pretty well decided that, come next starry night, I'm going to flag down that wagon driver and go for a ride.

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## Chronological Order

Carolina saw a dark shape moving through the curtain of snow at the same instant she felt the truck begin to slide on the black ice of the parking lot. The figure might have been reaching out to her, but she probably wouldn't have stopped, even if she hadn't been preoccupied with trying to stabilize the slide of the heavy pickup.

The mall day ended at nine and whoever closed the shop had to vacuum, straighten merchandise and tally the register. By planning ahead, it was possible to get away before 9:30. Whoever closed the shop had the additional duty of dropping the bank bag at the automatic teller on the edge of the mall parking lot. Carolina and her assistant manager, Lisa, learned to be alert to their surroundings and move quickly, but there hadn't been any problems with armed robbers at the mall for over five years. Or so the security agency said.

As manager of The Chain Chain, a small accessory shop in the mall, Carolina was using the fashion merchandising degree she'd earned at the community college back home. She enjoyed living in her efficiency apartment and saving money, for a house or maybe a nice wedding, if she met someone. She was glad to be out of tiny Seymour, even if Lubbock wasn't as much city as Dallas or Houston. And she was really glad to

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be out of the dead-end relationship with Donald. Carolina thought she'd give a lot to undo the last two years. But, as her mother often said, "You don't get to go backward. Just pick yourself up and keep moving."

Staying late for inventory and laying out new merchandise was the part of her job Carolina liked least. It meant her departure from the store would be two to three hours later than usual. She could sleep late the next day, but she didn't like being the last employee out of the mall except for security guards.

Inventory night on January 31 was even worse. A north Texas blizzard came up and visibility was especially low. Headlights reflected from the thick veil of blowing snow instead of showing a path. Lines on the parking lot were obscured. Only stop signs marked the once-familiar terrain and exits onto city streets, but even the stop signs were difficult to see in blizzard conditions. When Carolina felt the soft bump near the back of the truck while recovering from a slide, she imagined she had grazed an unseen curb. She didn't want to think about the dark figure she might have seen as she pulled away from the bank kiosk.

At home, Carolina quickly washed her face and pulled on flannel pj's and warm socks before curling up under a down comforter where her cat, Noodle, was already snoozing.

Noodle meowing for breakfast woke Carolina. The clock radio declared 11:10, late for Noodle. Scarcely any light showed at the edges of the window blinds, not enough for mid-morning, even in January. Carolina flipped open her cell phone, charging on the bedside

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