

NORTHWEST REVIEW

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Jo VanArkel

THE NEIGHBORHOOD

I.

Her name is Rachel. She was a kid who lived at the end of our dead end street. She left for California with her father. They went in a pickup truck that had only a few boxes in the back. I imagine they had her clothes and her stuffed animals. And somewhere in those boxes was a petticoat she wore around the neighborhood like it was some kind of party dress.

She was only six years old, but for a six-year-old person she was okay. I have a one-year-old baby, and Rachel was always coming over to play with my baby when she couldn't find anything else to do. She lived at the end of the street in a three-story house with her mother and her older sister. Her sister was about fourteen, and she was always driving their van to the end of the street and back.

Rachel and her mother and Sis—that's what they called the fourteen-year-old—moved in at the end of last summer. They were only leasing the house for a year. The people who own the house tried for over a year to sell it, but they were asking too much. Granted, the house is big and historical, but it's not in great shape. The paint is peeling and the wallpaper is stained. I know because I took a tour with my husband once when the realtors had an open house. In fact, the whole neighborhood took a tour. The people who live across the street were coming out the door as we were going in. We all laughed and avoided looking in one another's eyes because we knew what was going on even though the realtor didn't. It was funny and sad both. I think the only people who showed up that day were people from the neighborhood who had no intention of buying but just wanted to see how their neighbors lived—what books they had on their shelves and what color of towels they kept in their bathrooms.

The story was that Rachel, Mother, and Sis were going to

lease with the option to buy. They moved in first and were going to work on the house until Father showed up. Father was a lawyer who lived in California.

Everyone in the neighborhood was happy to hear that someone was going to fix up the house. We hoped they were nice people who weren't noisy. But David, my husband, says he could tell right off that these people weren't stable. David is a medical technician. He works at the state V.A. hospital.

Here's what happened. Once they moved in, people were coming up and down the street all the time—two bald men, four or five kids on bicycles with dogs running loose and chasing after them. (One of the dogs was named Josie. She was a small brown dog with alert eyes, very friendly. I heard later that Josie got hit by a car and died, which figures because she was always running loose.) A lady in a red Mercedes station wagon kept driving down to the end of the street and then a little later coming back.

As it turns out, they were all related. All these relatives lived within two blocks of one another, right around the corner in fact. The two bald men were brothers of Rachel's father who was still in California. Later, when the father finally turned up, I could see the resemblance. He was bald too although he was taller. The lady in the red Mercedes was an in-law.

They were all helping fix up the house. I was sitting out on the porch with my baby because he likes to be outside. It quiets him. Being on the porch, I could see all kinds of goings on. One day they'd be scraping the columns on the front stoop. Then they'd be sanding. Then they'd be painting. Another day they'd have an industrial wallpaper steamer and you could see them through the windows scraping the walls in the front room.

They were making progress when one day in the midst of it all, everything stopped. No bald men. No noisy kids on bicycles. No dogs. And I haven't seen that red Mercedes station wagon come down our street again. When David came home from work that night I told him about it. We were having dinner.

I passed David the pork chops. David, I said, have you noticed how quiet our street is?

David said, It is quiet. It's damn quiet.

The baby was eating turkey sticks and cheese. He loves cheese. That was the third word he learned to say after "bye" and "fish."

I said, I haven't seen that red Mercedes all day. That red Mercedes makes at least a dozen trips a day up and down this street.

Maybe they're resting, David said.

I watched the baby mash a turkey stick on the table and didn't

answer. But I thought to myself, this is different. I could tell people weren't resting down there at the end of the street.

II.

The neighborhood stayed like that for two days. Quiet. Outside of David and me and the baby, everybody else on the street is over fifty. We have three widows, an unmarried school teacher, a couple in their sixties who never had children, and two fellows who live together in the house across the street. David and I have speculated as to whether the two fellows are gay. Who knows? I can't picture it myself. They both teach at a local business college.

Then on the third day a police car came and parked down at the end of the street in front of the house. I was sitting on my porch and looking back. I think I must have been waiting for something like this. The mother came out of the house. Right away she was talking loudly. And waving her hands at the policeman. I did catch a few words. Keep him away! I don't want him on this street! she said. I could hear that part. Rachel came out on the front porch then, and the mother stopped talking. The mother yelled for Sis and sent them both up the street. They walked by my house and I could hear Rachel say, Who's Mama talking to?

Sis said, She's just talking to some friends.

The policeman got back in his car and came driving slowly back up the street. He even looked at me as he drove by. He studied me. A young mother with a baby in her lap. You know how police make you want to stand up and yell, Don't look at me! I didn't do anything! That's what I felt like doing.

About twenty minutes later Josie came trotting down the street, towards Rachel's house. Josie was the dog who would later get run over by a car. At the time I didn't realize that drama was unfolding before my very eyes. But here comes Josie and after Josie comes a boy on a bicycle. I recognized the boy. He was one of those who came down on his bicycle when the families were pitching in to fix up the house. He was maybe thirteen, a bit chubby and had blond hair that was spiked. I think those spike haircuts make the kids look mean. I guess that's what they want. He called after the dog. Josie! he said. Come on, girl!

Then he stopped his bicycle in front of my house and stared down the street. He sat that way for a long time, didn't move a muscle. By this time Josie had wandered back home. She wasn't

anywhere to be seen. But the boy wasn't looking for Josie. He was just staring at Rachel's house.

Just at that moment I looked down. My baby was biting my toes. He's taken to doing that lately. I can't go barefoot around my own house. He doesn't do this to his father, only to me. If I curl my toes under so he can't get them, then he bites the top of my feet. So he was biting my toes, and I yelled, Ouch! which made the baby laugh. Cut that out! I said. I shook my finger at him and looked stern. No biting, I said.

When I looked up again, I saw Rachel's mother flying by on a bicycle. It was a kid's bike so her knees practically touched her chin every time she pumped the pedals. She had on a bathrobe and under that a nylon nightgown. The bathrobe flapped behind her as she blew down the street, chasing after the blond-haired boy. I caught a glimpse of him just as his bike tore around the corner. She pedaled as hard as she could, but he was too fast for her.

When she got to the corner, she stopped her bike and stood up, straddling the bike between her legs. She opened up her mouth and yelled as loud as she could so everyone could hear, You keep your child-molesting son away from my house!

She yelled the exact same words a second time. Then she sat on the bicycle and pedaled back down the street. I looked at my baby. I can be nosy, but I don't stare at people when they've cut themselves loose like that.

The baby was playing with a golf ball. He would throw it on the concrete, then crawl after it. Ball, he would say once he had retrieved it. He'd shake the ball a few times then throw it again.

III.

School started and an entire winter went by. When snow and icy winds set in, people don't work much on neighborhood relations. It's enough to get out of bed and put your feet to a cold floor. Around here winter only lasts four months, which is not as bad as what people put up with farther north. I'm not a cold weather person. I wrap myself up with scarves and heavy coats and thick stockings, but I'm still cold. Cold fingers, cold feet. The longer winter gets the farther up my arms and legs cold travels until I think I'll lose my mind or freeze to death. I imagine someday I'll die in the winter.

So I'm always glad when March comes. Crocuses start to bloom and not long after that come daffodils and a person can

start to look around the world again and think of something else besides keeping warm. I'd only seen Rachel and Sis and the mother from a distance up until March. They'd pass by my house in their van on the way to or from school, to or from the store. My baby and I would look out at them through icy windows. And I'd see that from their van they were looking back at us.

As far as I could tell, work never did start up again on the house once it had stopped. I suppose they spent the winter with walls half-painted. And the father, the lawyer from California, didn't show up either. At least I never saw him. Maybe he sent his family out here and never intended to follow them. Or maybe once they were gone, he realized how glad he was to be alone.

Anyway, it wasn't until March that I really got to know Rachel. At first I didn't like her. She was always cutting through my yard. I never did that as a kid, cut through people's yards. But Rachel was always wandering around other people's yards looking for something to do. She didn't have any riding toys or a swingset. And I never saw the mother out playing with her. Except for that one time when she blew down the street in her nightgown on Sis's bicycle, I never saw the mother out on her own two legs.

Rachel would cut through my yard and walk right past my dining room window, which made my dog crazy. My dog is good, but he barks at people who cut through our yard, especially meter readers and children. Before I could do anything about it, Rachel would walk past my window, the dog would bark like someone had walked off with his tail, and the baby would wake up from his nap and cry.

My baby has never been a sleeper. Every night we are like wrestlers, me trying to pin him down to sleep, him fighting to stay awake. When he gets really sleepy he starts hitting me. He knocks his head against my breast bone.

My baby taught me how to like Rachel. He didn't care if she cut through yards, or lived in a half-finished house, or wore clothes that didn't match and left her shoes and stockings wherever they might come off. Whenever he was playing on the porch and she came around the corner (it must have seemed like magic the way she appeared from nowhere) he would drop his toys and hold his arms out to her and smile. And if she got bored with him and suddenly left to chase a stray dog or pick flowers from somebody's garden, my baby would cry and cry and sometimes I couldn't get him to stop until we went inside and I gave him a cookie.

Rachel was good with my baby. Jason, she'd say. Jason, watch,

she'd say. And then she'd make a face or some funny noise and baby would laugh. She liked to play with baby toys and talk baby talk. But sometimes she'd carry his toys off into other yards or fill his little boxes up with mud. And one time I caught her placing his juice bottle up on a window sill where he couldn't reach it, and he was crying and hitting his own face with his hands.

I told Rachel that she mustn't do things like that because babies can't help themselves. That's cruel, I told her.

What's cruel mean? she asked.

Cruel means you do something to hurt someone on purpose.

David says it's hard to tell with a case like Rachel's. Maybe the chubby boy on the bike did something to Rachel. Maybe he didn't.

IV.

My baby has been slow to walk. Lately, he gets in a squatting position and pushes himself up to where he is standing. He'll stand for a few seconds, look around. Oh! Oh! he'll say. He knows already that the world is a different place when you're on your own two feet. When I see my baby standing up with nothing to grab onto I am breathless at what he'll do next.

Rachel started pecking in our windows in late spring. Maybe it seems like a little problem. But it's hard enough to have privacy on a dead end street without kids window-peeking all the time. We were eating dinner the first time. She came right up to our dining room window which is low to the ground and pressed her face against the screen. Hello! she said. I see you in there!

My dog went nuts.

David said to ignore her and we kept on eating and finally she went away. But the very next day she was back again. Hello in there! she said.

David got up from the table and went outside. He said something and Rachel left.

What did you say to her? I asked when he came back in.

I told her to stop pecking in our windows, he said.

We thought that would take care of the problem, but it didn't. Two days later she was pecking in our bedroom window. It was afternoon and I was folding laundry that I'd dumped out on the bed. I had all my clothes on which is not always the case. Sometimes I run around the house in my underwear. I half dress then get busy changing a diaper or answering the phone. Jason was

on the bed playing in the clean clothes. He'd grab a shirt and wave it like a flag over his head then throw it on the floor.

He had pushed a whole pile of sorted underwear on the floor, and I was bending down to pick it all up, when I had a feeling. Someone was watching me. It's the same way you feel when you've been caught in a lie. It hits people in different places—stomach, neck muscles. I feel it in the backs of my legs.

Once, before the baby was born, I had this same feeling. I was taking a bath in the middle of the day with the bathroom door open, and from the corner of my eye I saw a man's face in the bedroom window across the hall. I sat up straight, looked at the window, but no one was there. The window sheers breathed in and out. I climbed out of the tub, dripping and naked, and locked all the doors in the house.

This time when I looked up I caught Rachel's face framed in the window. She had her hands cupped at either side of her face and her nose was pressed against the screen. I walked over to the window, bent down so my face was even with hers, and she didn't even look embarrassed or run away.

Wait right there, Rachel, I said. I want to talk to you.

My mind was going now. I didn't care if the father did dump them, or if that boy did do something to Rachel. There are lines that people do not cross, and we are supposed to learn about these lines early on. I put my baby on my hip. I was going to tell Rachel why pecking in other people's windows is wrong.

But when I got outside, Rachel was gone. At first I thought she had gotten scared and run home, but when I walked around the corner of the house I saw she'd just moved to another window to get a better view.

I had walked up behind her, taken in enough air for a long speech and opened my mouth, when Rachel turned around and took my baby's outstretched hand.

Did you hear the tornado last night? she said.

I ignored her question. Rachel, I said. You mustn't peek in our windows.

Rachel was clapping hands with the baby, but her face was solemn. I heard it, she said. I was scared.

It's true we get our share of tornadoes in the springtime here. I can remember as a kid waking up to a room blue with electricity and the air smelling like wet metal. A few years ago a teenager was killed in a tornado. She pulled her car over to the side of the road and crawled in a ditch, but the storm picked her car up and threw it down on top of her. The tornado bounced through a whole street of houses and crumpled them up like paper. We

only had a tree come down. David and I were thrown out of bed by the crash. It missed our bedroom window by inches, and the next morning David took a picture of me standing between the stiff arms of the tree. In the picture I look like a captive, like the tree arms have got a hold of me and won't let go.

But there wasn't any tornado the night before. Rachel must've had a bad dream. It might've rained and there might've been some lightning and thunder. I've slept through storms like that. But I've never slept through any tornado.

I put Jason on the ground at my feet and got down on my knees to where I was face to face with Rachel. I took her by the arms and said, Listen, if I catch you peeking in our windows again, I'll—I thought for a minute about what I could say that would show her I meant business. I'll call the police, I said. I held her arms a little more tightly. Peeking in people's windows is against the law, Rachel.

She looked straight at me, and I could tell she knew what I was saying. But some kids just won't admit that they've been caught.

My father says there aren't any tornadoes in California, she said. Earthquakes, but no tornadoes.

Rachel had this stubborn look on her face—the kind of look kids get when someone's about to hit them, and they don't care. The kind of look that says nothing you can do will hurt me.

Right then, sparks went off in my head. I can't claim any good reason for why it was so important to make my point, except that there I was down on my knees trying to tell her something and she pushed me into it. I wanted to shake her, to make her admit that she was listening and knew what I was talking about, as if there was something big at stake here. My neck was starting to feel hot and itchy.

So I did something mean. I don't know why, but I told Rachel that a long time ago, a man was murdered in her house. I wanted to make her feel afraid. I wasn't lying. There really was a man murdered in her house. The man's name was Stinger and at the turn of the century he was an important banker. It wasn't a messy unsolved murder where arms and legs were cut off and buried about the neighborhood. Some guy was unhappy because Stinger wouldn't give him a loan, so the man came to Stinger's home and shot him.

I told Rachel that Stinger died in the attic. But he probably died in the front hallway or some place like that.

Rachel was quiet for a long time. She was quiet for so long that I got embarrassed and couldn't look her in the eye. I let go

of her arms.

At last she pointed at something behind me and said, Jason's eating dirt.

V.

A few days went by. The next time I saw Rachel she was wearing a lacy petticoat and a lavender sweater. She came up to the porch where my baby and I were playing and said, What does this look like? She held the petticoat skirts out and twirled around.

I said, It looks like a petticoat to me. But Rachel had never heard of the word petticoat.

It's a slip, she told me.

Oh, I said.

I thought petticoat was a much prettier name. But I didn't tell her that. Instead I said, Aren't you hot in that sweater?

Rachel ignored me and sat down on the steps to play with the baby. I'm going to California to live with my dad, she said. We're going to plant watermelons. We're leaving tonight so I need to play outside as much as I can because I'll be in the car a long time.

This was the first I'd heard of any trip to California, so I didn't know whether to believe her or not.

How come you're going to California? I said.

Rachel handed Jason a small plastic block and watched him shake it and throw it on the ground. I just am, she said.

I watched as Jason reached out and grabbed a handful of Rachel's hair. When he pulled her hair, she made a face and the baby laughed. Stop, she said. She pried his fingers loose from her hair, and he laughed and reached for her again. I felt sad for the baby. If Rachel did go to California, he would miss her.

Then out of nowhere Rachel said, How big is Jason's room?

I don't know, I said.

I mean, is it big or medium or small, Rachel said.

It's medium, I answered.

My mother gave Sis the biggest room in the house. Then I have the next biggest and Mama has the smallest room of all, she said.

I know that in Rachel's house, all the bedrooms are upstairs. The big bedroom goes all the way across the front of the house. I think it used to be two bedrooms, but a previous owner knocked out a wall. The other two bedrooms are at the back of the house.

Both are small. But the smallest one is more like a closet or a cell than a bedroom. A person could barely fit a twin bed in there. I remember saying so when I took the open house tour.

That was nice of your mother to give you the bigger room and keep the smallest room for herself, I said.

Mama loves that little room, Rachel said. She says it's like a tree house up there. She pretends she's up in the trees when she looks out the window. Sometimes we can't even get her out of bed. She stays in that little room all day long.

I pictured Rachel's mother lying in bed in that tiny room, looking out the window at the trees, not wanting to get up. And all at once I felt bad for Rachel. I felt bad for all of them—Rachel, the mother, Sis, even their big black dog.

After that, Rachel went home. A little later in the afternoon I saw Rachel and her mother outside. Rachel was still in her petticoat and her mother was taking pictures. Rachel would stand before a tree and hold the skirts of her petticoat out and smile. Then the mother would snap the picture. Rachel would strike another pose and the mother would take another picture. And then the mother just kept snapping pictures even when Rachel stopped posing, even when Rachel stepped out of the frame.

Just before dinner Rachel came down and got our phone number. She was going to call Jason once she got to California. I tried to explain to her that the baby didn't know yet to talk into the phone. Whenever I put the receiver to his ear he just listens and breathes. But Rachel insisted he would talk to her. I'll bet he'll laugh if I tell him some jokes, she said.

When night came, I went outside to walk my baby to sleep. I've taken to doing that lately since the weather's been nice. I wrap him in a flannel blanket and go outside just as it's getting dark. The tree bats are coming out, and we watch as they flutter through the sky. I walk up and down the street, and my baby and I hold onto one another against the dark. Sometimes it takes an hour before his eyes finally close and his head rests on my shoulder.

When we started to walk on this night, I noticed right off the pickup parked in front of Rachel's house. It had those few measly boxes in the back. My baby seemed especially willing to go to sleep, and I'd barely got to the end of the street and back before his head was on my shoulder and his eyes were nearly closed. He was humming to himself the way babies do.

That's when all of a sudden Rachel's porch light came on and they all spilled out of the house. A man—I suppose he was Rachel's father—Sis, the mother, and Rachel. All of them tum-

bled out of the house at once. The passenger door was opened and Rachel climbed in. The man came around and got in behind the wheel.

Bye, sissy, bye! I heard Sis yelling from the porch step. I love you, sissy! she said. Her voice was high and wavered from tears.

The mother stood by Rachel's side of the car for a moment, then stepped back. The truck started and the lights flicked on. The mother and Sis turned back to the house and the pickup made its way up the street.

I stepped off the road, walked up my driveway. I felt bad being there, felt like I'd witnessed some terribly private thing. But even so, as the pickup passed I turned to look. I hoped maybe Rachel might wave. But I couldn't even see her through the window. She was slumped way down, or maybe she was resting her head in her daddy's lap. I went inside and put my baby down in his crib. The air was warm and still and already he had sweat on his little nose.

Later, when I was lying in bed, I thought about my baby, and Rachel, and how once an old man put his hands on me. He was a farmer who owned some horses which he sometimes let my friends and me ride. I never told anyone, and once he put his hands on me, I never went back to ride his horses again. I don't think about that old man very often. And when I do, it's as if he put his hands on some other little girl and not on me at all.

After I'd gotten in bed, David crawled under the covers. I love the feel of his smooth skin when he first gets into bed and pulls me up next to him. He was feeling romantic on that particular night, and he started to kiss me. The window was open and a breeze was blowing in which made the open blind click against the window sill. David kept kissing me and I kept thinking about those open blinds, not that I thought someone was looking in, but sometimes I get an idea in my mind and I can't get it out or concentrate on anything else.

So finally I said, David would you shut the blinds?

And he didn't get mad or laugh at me. He's real good to me that way. Without a word he reached over and dropped the blinds, so that no one could see us.