

On Hickory Road all the houses are numbered, and all the people who live behind the numbers have stories. Some of their stories are hidden away in their hearts, in their closets, in bureau drawers, as secrets they can't tell. They keep them only for themselves, only to ponder in the dark, behind their windows, inside curtains, in their memories, their wishing, their silence.

But before there were numbers on these houses, before there were houses or roads at all, there were secrets in this place. Those secrets will still be here long after memories of the numbered houses are gone. There are things here that none of us can reach; they're hidden inside realities we don't yet know.

* * *

Sometimes stories escape from their hiding places inside houses. They rise up a chimney on a wisp of smoke, or cross a doorsill attached to a piece of clothing. Sometimes they float on voices through an open window on a warm spring afternoon.

Number 17

That's loud shouting floating through one of the open windows at 17 Hickory Road. The shouting is very amusing to Fat Mersey, newly turned thirteen years old. Fat's mother has a voice that can become louder and louder, increasingly shrill as it drifts from a window. And when that voice is aimed at Fat's father, it often shares Mersey family secrets with everyone on Hickory Road. Fat enjoys knowing that his father is being humiliated.

"If you were a real man you could get a good job, but you're a wimp, George. A sissy wimp. And you can't do anything right...NOT EVEN SEX..."

This is all very hard for neighbors to listen to, and sometimes they have to stick their fingers in their ears to hide from it. Meanwhile, Fat Mersey's father is running around the house slamming down windows and, of course, Fat's mother is running right behind, opening them again, and shouting louder.

"Oh, you don't want them to hear, is that it? Well, they will hear. Everyone on the street will hear, and they'll all know that you are impotent, impotent, IMPO..." SLAM. Fat's father got to the window again.

Number 18

Down the front steps across the street at 18 Hickory Road comes Mrs. Alicia Becker for a not-too-brisk afternoon stroll around the neighborhood. First she'll turn right, heading toward the cul-de-sac at the end of the street. When she gets there she'll walk back along the opposite side, and go all the way to the corner of Acorn Street. Then she'll come back along her own side of Hickory Road until she reaches her front steps again.

Alicia has sharp eyes and ears that won't miss much around the houses and yards she passes. Often her

observations of neighborhood activities will be accurate and telling. What they will miss are the secrets that are buried out of sight and beyond hearing.

Number 20

As she passes number 20 Alicia notices the whimper.

“What was that?” she thinks. “Was that a whimper? It sounded like a dog, but the Lowes don’t have a dog. I’ll bet it’s Holly Lowe pretending she’s a dog. That’s hilarious. Why would a person pretend to be a dog — whimpering like that?”

Holly Lowe’s whimper is actually a cry of terror. For several nights now she has been having a recurring nightmare in which she hears a news broadcast about a hideous murder. And Holly suddenly realized that she is the murderer. And even though she can’t remember how this murder was done, or who it was done to, she is becoming more and more convinced that it actually happened, that she did it, and that she will be discovered.

Last night she had the dream again, and stayed awake trembling until dawn while her husband and children slept. Her husband must have heard about the murder, she thinks. Would he suspect that she was the murderer? Somebody must suspect her. She must have left clues. Even awake now, in daylight sunshine, she waits for the police to solve the crime, to realize who did it, to come to her house and drag her away.

“Someday they’ll figure out it was me,” she whispers. “They’ll come rushing in here through that door, and they’ll take everything away from me.” She knows they will. Maybe today. Could be any minute now. The whimpering continues.

Number 22

There’s Maria Sosa in her driveway. Alicia waves, calls, “Hello, Maria.”

She thinks, “Why does Maria carry that silly, little white dog around all the time? Sniffy, she calls it; that’s just bizarre. Of course, her husband spends all his time working on his architecture projects, planning to put up some giant something-or-other somewhere. She probably needs the dog to keep her company.”

Standing by the window in his upstairs study, Karl Sosa doesn’t notice Alicia Becker pass below, doesn’t hear her call to his wife. His mind is far away in another place and time.

Karl is making an intricate drawing of the labyrinth that once stood near the City of Crocodiles in ancient Egypt: majestic rooms opening into long corridors lined with countless doors, hidden entrances in hidden ceilings, interconnected terraces and courtyards; stairways that rise up into some mysterious void, spiraling passageways that turn back onto themselves, trapdoors opening into deep darkness. Karl is trying to sketch it all. He feels that he’s sketching it from memory.

Karl is quite sure he knows that place, that he has been there sometime. He hopes to make a model of it now to help him remember. “There were two levels,” he thinks. “Three thousand rooms.”

Number 24

On the front steps at number 24, little Jenna Overton is serving a picnic cracker to a stylishly dressed doll who is sitting in a highchair. On the next step, Charlie Overton holds a diapered baby doll in his lap.

“There’s our house husband,” thinks Alicia. “Charlie plays with dolls while his wife plays big shot at the bank.” As he waves to Alicia, Charlie feeds the doll an imaginary sip of something from a doll-size bottle.

Often, at bedtime, when Jenna is ready for sleeping, she asks Charlie to tell her stories about her doll Polka, and Polka’s many adventures. By now Charlie has made up dozens of chapters about Polka’s travels: mistakenly left behind at a vacation hotel and finding her way back to Hickory Road; making friends with anthropomorphic butterflies, chipmunks, and bees; escaping from villainous foxes and crows; overcoming lightning storms, winds, floods. He speaks in the voices of all the characters, and sets up scenes with dollhouse furnishings: lamps, rugs, clocks, tiny umbrellas, boots. The details seem very real to him, more real than his marriage to Elizabeth Temple-Overton.

Number 26

“Oh my God, listen to that voice,” Alicia thinks. “That’s Lexie Holliday on the phone. How could you miss it? Loud enough to hear downtown. Loud, loud, loud. Ouch. And that trashy laugh. I don’t know how Robert H. can stand that laugh; he’s such a quiet, proper man.”

Alicia sees Robert H. Holliday coming around a corner of his house pushing a lawn mower. She calls, “Hello, Robert.”

“Oh, no,” she thinks, “Is he going to mow the lawn like that? In that buttoned-up suit, with the vest, and the high collar?”

The truth is that Robert H. Holliday’s lawn-mowing wardrobe is limited by his own choice. He would rather have been born a hundred years earlier, so he usually dresses in the style of Calvin Coolidge.

In their high school yearbook, Robert H. Holliday was described as “Most Dignified,” Lexie as “Entertainment Tonight.” They met at a house party he attended by mistake. All Lexie’s boyfriends wore studded motorcycle jackets, and she had never seen a high-school boy who dressed like Calvin Coolidge. So she pushed him into a closet, pulled her pants down, and showed him the large tattoo across her buttocks: two symmetrical serpents, each biting at the other’s tail, inscribed: “Do What You Want.” Robert H. was overwhelmed with love.

Number 28

“Nobody home in the Blochs’ house,” Alicia thinks. “I hope Stanley didn’t get lost someplace. He’s not the smartest kid in the class.”

Stanley Bloch is, in fact, lost this afternoon at his work in the hardware store. It’s hard for him to keep his mind on sorting screws for inventory today. He keeps losing track while he’s practicing tryout lines for the part of Othello, the Moor of Venice, in the Town Amateur Players’ production of Shakespeare’s play.

More than anything else, he would like his wife to see him triumph on the stage. He knows how much Brenda loves the theater. He imagines what it would be like to say, “I guess you’re proud of me now. Right, Brenda?”

With his fingers full of screws, Stanley practices Othello’s lines under his breath:

“It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul, —
Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars! —
It is the cause. Yet I’ll not shed her blood;
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,
And smooth as monumental alabaster.
Yet she must die, else she’ll betray more men.
Put out the light, and then put out the light.”

Stanley is happy that he can remember the lines. He thinks of the applause he’ll hear in the theater, of Brenda smiling proudly at him.

At that same moment Brenda Bloch is lying naked, moving to her body’s own throbbing rhythm, on top of the director of the Town Amateur Players. They’re on a picnic blanket spread out under shading trees in Robinwood Park; it’s a place where they meet every Tuesday afternoon. Sunlight, filtered through the leafy branches above them, comes and goes gently across her bared back, his chest, his thighs, her thighs, as their bodies move together, sunlight to shadow...sunlight to shadow...

Number 32

At the closed end of the street she waves to the Brunts. Salma Brunt waves back. Salma’s husband, B.D., is carrying luggage out of the house.

“I always wonder what B.D. stands for,” Alicia thinks. “Probably something exotic.”

She tries to hear what language the Brunts are speaking today. “Sometimes it’s Arabic,” Alicia thinks, “and sometimes Chinese...what does Bantu sound like? You never know what’s going on with them. And even when he’s speaking English, I usually can’t figure out what he’s talking about.”

In a few minutes a limousine will come to bring B.D. Brunt to the airport. Tonight he will be on a flight to Mumbai where, on an evening later in the week, he has an appointment to meet, and perhaps kill, a shadowy Albanian cyber-espionage expert code-named “Kid A.” B.D. Brunt doesn’t notice that Alicia Becker has stopped in the street in front of his house.

Number 31

Starting back toward Acorn Street, Alicia passes the Costas’ house. Paul Costa is busy searching through a pile of bottles in the back of his pickup.

“Could be a genie in there, Alicia. You never know.”

“Hmm,” she thinks. “It’s always a new notion with Paul, or a new pipe dream, and none of them ever get him anywhere. It’s a good thing his wife has a real job.” (Roberta Costa is an undercover police detective.)

Paul has been sure all his life that someday a miraculous event would come to him, change everything, and give his life enormous significance. But what would it look like? How would he recognize it? Somewhere, hidden, that miracle is waiting for him if he can only figure out how to get to it. He thinks that numbers might be an important clue. He has a paper in his wallet containing the mysterious Fibonacci sequence carried out to eighteen places: 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89, 144, 233, 377, 610, 987, 1597, the numbers that define the geometric shape of shellfish, waves, spiral galaxies, and, perhaps, his fate.

On the street downtown Paul is always looking for messengers from magic places. He goes out of his way to talk to dwarfs, searches for women wearing witch hats in the crowds at malls. He scans every sidewalk for strangely glowing stones and reaches deep into seat cushions on buses to feel for golden rings.

When he read that fairy godmothers sometimes give a kind of magic cap to their godchildren, he called his godmother in Jersey City, even though he hadn’t seen her for many years.

“Hello, Aunt Gina. This is Paul, your godchild, Cecelia’s son.”

“Yeah? Are you in high school yet?”

“That was a long time ago, Aunt Gina. I wanted to ask you if you are a fairy godmother.”

“Eh? You’re a fairy?”

“No, Aunt Gina. I was asking if you’re a fairy.”

“Do I look like a fairy, stupid?”

“I wanted to know about caps that fairy godmothers might...”

“Eh, you wanna take a crap?”

“Okay, thanks, Aunt Gina. I’ll see you later.”

“Yeah, invite me to your graduation.”

He’ll never stop waiting for magic to touch him, never stop searching to make contact with some hidden world. “One day I’ll find it,” he thinks. “I know I’ll be ready.”

Number 29

Alicia notices the closed-up doors and windows of the DeBoer house, the silence inside. “Nobody moving in there this afternoon. They’re probably both at work, probably making life miserable for somebody.”

Max DeBoer is sitting behind the sales manager’s desk at his insurance agency this afternoon making life miserable for Michael Butcher, his softest, chubbiest salesman. “I ought to fire you right now, you son of a bitch,” says Max. “You haven’t sold one life insurance policy in the last three weeks.”

“Please, Max,” says Michael Butcher, “I’m trying my hardest. I’ve already sold them to all my relatives, and none of them will talk to me anymore.”

“I’ll give you one more week,” says Max. “And, if I don’t see some new sales from you, Butcher, you’re dead meat.”

Michael Butcher is sobbing, big tears rolling down his moonlike face onto Max’s shiny desk. “Do you have any leads you can give me, Max?”

“Sure,” says Max. “You could try Santa Claus. He looks like he might be another relative of yours.”

“Please, Max.”

“Or you can try this guy; he lives across the street from me. He’s probably dumb enough to buy anything.” Max writes a name and address on a notepad, and tears the page off.

Michael reads the scribbled words: “Stanley Bloch, 28 Hickory Road.”

“Thank you, Max,” he says. “Maybe he’s dumb enough to buy a jumbo policy.”

“For your sake, he’d better be,” says Max DeBoer.

Meanwhile, Elena DeBoer is composing an email on her computer at F. Head & Associates, Attorneys At Law, where she has applied for promotion to the job of human resources manager.

Elena is very political, and she wants to make sure she beats out her rival, Marie Szymborska, for the job. In Elena's opinion Marie Szymborska is "a piece of shit."

Memo To: Mr. Fred Head Chairman of the Board

Personal And Confidential (Elena is careful about the wording. She wants this email to be very professional.)

Dear Mr. Head,

It has been brought to my attention... (She likes the sound of that phrase, "Very professional," she thinks)... that Ms. M. Szymborska, who has applied for the job of HR Mgr. has been badmouthing you around this place of employment. It has been heard that she often refers to you as Mr. F***head, even though it is well known that your first name is not F***, but is either Fred or F.

It is believed that F. Head & Associates would be much better off if that kind of person were not considered for such an important position. Should you desire to be given additional information about this person's unprofessional behavior, please do not hesitate to reach out to me.

Sincerely,

E. DeBoer

Human Resources Specialist

Elena hits the SEND button sharply, and bangs her small fist down on the computer.

"I want that job," she says. "I want that fucking job so much."

Number 27

Alicia sees little Ricky Leander sitting on the front steps at number 27. He waves at her, and smiles.

"What a sweet little boy he is," she thinks. "And so polite. He must be about twelve now."

Even at twelve Ricky is already working on his adult career. He intends to be an entrepreneur, and has been planning his career moves carefully. Ricky's most recent move was to explore the internet for information on picking locks.

By now he has searched through many of the houses on Hickory Road when no one was at home. As he smiles at Mrs. Becker, he thinks about what he has found upstairs in her house: the desk drawer where she keeps her checkbook, the pistol in the shoebox on a shelf at the back of her bedroom closet, the vibrator in

her underwear drawer.

Ricky has a large collection of photographs he has taken inside various houses during his visits. They'll be useful, he thinks, in his next entrepreneurial venture — blackmail.