

Have you ever wanted to steal
someone else's life?

LOOKER

LAURA SIMS



LOOKER

LAURA SIMS



Copyright © 2019 Laura Sims

The right of Laura Sims to be identified as the Author of
the Work has been asserted by her in accordance with the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published by Simon & Schuster, Inc, USA

First published in Great Britain in 2019 by Tinder Press
An imprint of HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

I

Apart from any use permitted under UK copyright law, this publication may
only be reproduced, stored, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means,
with prior permission in writing of the publishers or, in the case of
reprographic production, in accordance with the terms of licences
issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to
real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

Trade paperback ISBN 978 1 4722 5881 6

Offset in 13,38/17,27 pt Centuar MT Std by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY



Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable
products and made from wood grown in well-managed forests and other
controlled sources. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected
to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
An Hachette UK Company
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.tinderpress.co.uk
www.headline.co.uk
www.hachette.co.uk

For Margaret Lewis

It was Mrs H who started calling her *the actress*, making it sound like she was one of those old Hollywood legends – Audrey Hepburn, Grace Kelly, Lauren Bacall. That may have been accurate early in her career, when she was a serious indie star, but now her fiercely sculpted, electric-blue-clad body adorns the side of nearly every city bus I see. It's an ad for one of those stupid blockbusters – and she isn't even the *main* star, she's only the *female* star – so she's a sellout, like all the rest. It's disappointing only because she belongs to us. To our block, I mean.

And here she comes – passing so close to where I sit on my stoop that I can see the tiny blue bunny rabbits embroidered on her baby's hat. She has him strapped to her chest in that cloth contraption all the moms have. It should look ludicrous, the baby an awkward lump on the front of her white linen sundress, but somehow the actress pulls it off. She more than pulls it off – as he peers up at her she lowers her head and shakes her shoulder-length auburn hair in his face. He squeals in delight. They look like they're being filmed right now, like they're co-starring in a shampoo commercial,

LAURA SIMS

but there's only me watching. She knows I'm sitting here but she doesn't acknowledge me when she passes by. She just stares straight ahead with that slight smile, meant to be mysterious, I'm sure. *I see your airbrushed body on the bus almost every day!* I want to call out. I take a long drag on my cigarette and blow a cloud of smoke after her and the babe.

*

Later on, riding the subway home after my night class, I wonder about the sad sacks filling my train car. What are their twelve-hour workdays like? Full of tedium and sullen acceptance? Rage? The women's faces have gone slack and gray by this time of night. The men's shirts are rumpled, with sweat stains at the pits. A few reek of cigarettes and booze. There they sit, swaying and bumping in the unclean air. Does the actress ever take the subway? Maybe once in a while, to prove that she's a regular person. But usually there's a car outside her house, idling, waiting to whisk her anywhere she wants or needs to go. 'To the park,' I imagine her saying. To the theater, to the trendy restaurant I've never heard of, to the Apple Store, to the apple orchard upstate. Meanwhile I sit on the stoop or shrug myself up, back and legs aching, to find my greasy MetroCard and join the tide of commoners underground. Does she remember how hot it is down on the platform in late summer? And

LOOKER

how cold it gets in winter? Until you step inside the train car and have to struggle out of your heavy coat and scarf (if you can, packed as you are like sardines) because it's steaming and suddenly so are you. Does she remember these and other indignities of 'regular person' city life? Does she breathe a sigh of relief every time she passes one of the station entrances in her sleek black car? I would. I'm certain I would. The past would seem like a distant bad dream. Or a joke.

I pass by the actress's house on my way home, as usual. A rich yellow glow spills from the garden-level windows of her brownstone. I've never seen a prettier, more welcoming room in all my life. The hardwood floor, the stainless steel appliances, and the wood-topped island at the heart of the kitchen all gleam under the yellow light. Closer to the window, there's a cozy play area with expensive-looking toys strewn across a simple beige carpet. Wooden animals, an elaborate dollhouse, a riding toy for the baby. Only the best for her three kids. Only the handmade, the safest, the locally sourced, the organically grown. In that, she and her husband are no different from everyone else around here, coddling their children with overpriced toys, clothes, and food – and then the kids will grow up hating their parents anyway, just like the ones raised on spankings, secondhand smoke, and Oscar Mayer lunch meats do.

LAURA SIMS

Tonight, the husband leans on the kitchen island, chatting comfortably with the cook as she works. The husband is a screenwriter – that’s how he and the actress met, he co-wrote one of her earliest films. He’s handsome, of course – Iranian American, with shining dark eyes and a lush but neatly trimmed black beard. Now *that’s* a beard. Not like the straggly hipster beards you see around here. The husband could be a movie star himself, but he remains a writer. Happy to be in her shadow, I suppose. Or not happy, merely biding his time before he leaves her for the nanny . . . or the cook? Either would be a very poor choice, considering what he’d be leaving behind. The two girls are seated in the play area, organizing the dollhouse. Bickering, I think. The eight-year-old girl, an exact replica of the actress, with her auburn hair and wide-set green eyes, brushes the six-year-old’s hand away from a minuscule wardrobe, and then moves it herself. The younger sister pouts, folding her arms over her chest and glaring at the back of her sister’s head. She has her father’s dark hair and dark eyes. The two of them look like cousins rather than sisters. The black-haired, green-eyed baby, though, is a perfect mix of his parents’ genes; he sits behind the girls, chewing placidly on some sort of squeezey toy shaped like a giraffe.

The actress sits alone at the kitchen table in the back of the room with her face lighted by her laptop screen, typing

LOOKER

away at something – an e-mail? A novel? A tweet to her followers and fans? I know she tweets – or someone tweets *for* her – but she isn't very active on Twitter. She mostly retweets women's rights activists, left-leaning politicians, and her famous friends. I tried following her on Instagram once, thinking I'd get a window into her innermost life, but it was just a carefully managed picture parade. Magazine-style shots of things like fresh blueberries heaped in a child's hand (*#summer!*), the sunset from an airplane window (*#cominghomeatlast*), one artfully blurred, close-up 'selfie' of her and her husband's faces (*#datenight*). Maybe it wasn't a curated account, maybe it really was her posting, but I knew I wouldn't find any intimate moments there that could match what I saw through her window almost daily.

A full glass of wine sits by her hand. *Too close*, I want to say. I lean toward the window. *You should move that wine away from your laptop – I lost one that way, once.* But nothing will happen to the actress's laptop: she won't spill the wine, and even if she does, won't she just laugh as a staff member mops up the mess and sets a gleaming new computer before her? And then continue as she was, typing merrily away, completely unscathed?

I've never crossed their little fenced-in garden, of course. I stand on the sidewalk in front of the fern-and-ivy-filled

LAURA SIMS

planter that hangs from the fence – placed there as a sort of screen, I’m sure – and have a direct line of view into the kitchen at night. I’m grateful they’ve never thought to install blinds. That’s how confident they are. *No one would dare stand in front of our house and watch us*, they think. And they’re probably right: except for me.

People pass behind me, probably mistaking me for the actress, the golden one relaxing for a moment in the cool night air. *Was that her?* they wonder. But they don’t turn back to look – it would be too intrusive. Sometimes I even pretend to be her when someone walks by. I straighten up a bit, try to hold my head at that particular angle she does, try to act like I’ve just stepped away from my arduous, exalted life. By the time I’ve made this transformation in posture and attitude, they’re already gone, and it’s just me, alone at the gate.

In *The Sultan of Hanover Street*, a moody indie film from ten years ago, she played the adult daughter of the star, Richard McKane, who looked fifty though he was surely in his seventies by then. She proved herself in *Sultan*, especially in the hospital scene. She played it straight, without tears or cheap sentimentality. She was captivating. I remember sitting in the dark next to Nathan, studying her face for the first time: the sharp cheekbones and those giant green

LOOKER

eyes. Her features loomed large, unbearably beautiful, as though she belonged to some glorious alien race. I fixed my inferior eyes on that face and felt it lift me out of my seat, out of my life for a moment. The warmth of Nathan's hand in mine brought me back, held me down, made me thankful to be exactly where and who I was.

Nathan. That hand is gone, and has taken him with it. Or vice versa. Whatever. He's gone.

So she gathered her accolades for the role in *Sultan* – not an Oscar, but a Golden Globe for Best Supporting Actress and glowing reviews. She did more indie work for a while, spreading her roots through the Hollywood soil, building her rep as an indie darling, and then? She sold. Right. Out. She signed on to do a Michael Bay movie – something with a tsunami and killer robots. What a joke. But it was a huge hit with the masses and it made her famous. She promptly married her screenwriter boyfriend, bought her house here, and started having babies. Her first two came the standard two years apart – the boy an unconventional five-plus years later. What happened in the intervening years? Fertility issues like mine? Marital trouble? Or was the third child one of those 'happy accidents'? Maybe it was none of the above. Maybe one day she woke up, hungering for another baby, and so she went and had one – just like

LAURA SIMS

that. I wonder if she'll stop at three. Why should she, with others to do the messy work? I see her with the kids, but rarely with more than one at a time. The other moms in this neighborhood teeming with families pile their strollers with two, even three kids at once, struggling and cursing under their breaths as they push uphill toward the park. But the actress makes parenting look glamorous and fun. She's always stylishly dressed, even in weekend clothes, and I can't imagine her breaking a sweat. If I were a local mom, I would hate her. *It isn't as easy as you make it look!* I would shout through her ground-floor windows. Imagine how my voice would pierce the cozy domestic scene! The kids would run to the windows, hands and faces pressed to the glass. The baby might burst into tears. The husband would furrow his handsome brow and start immediately for the door. *Who goes there?* I imagine him calling into the night. And the actress? She'd glance up for a moment with a distant, distracted smile, take a sip from her wineglass, and go back to her screen.

*

The actress's baby is screaming his head off in front of my building. The nanny, a skinny strawberry blonde, leans her head close to his in the stroller and shushes him gently, waving a toy in his face and letting him grab it. He continues

LOOKER

to scream. She rummages in the diaper bag slung across the stroller handles and then sighs. Finally she notices me, smoking on the front stoop, just a few feet away. We've exchanged smiles and brief greetings over the past months, whenever she's passed by with the stroller. Once, I got up the nerve to say, 'Cute boy,' and she replied, 'Yes, but he's a handful,' in a cheerful, maternal way. I fought the urge to ask if the baby was hers – knowing, of course, that it wasn't – but hoping it would prompt her to share some tidbit about her boss. Even to hear her say the actress's name would have given me a little thrill. 'I've left his pacifier at home,' she says now. 'Oh no,' I say, frowning sympathetically. The child's screams seem to crescendo at the word *pacifier*. The nanny starts to turn around for home with him, shaking her head, when I stand abruptly and say, 'Wait.' She looks up at me, takes in the cigarette still smoking in my hand. I drop it, crush it under my heel, and go down the steps to her. 'I'll watch him for a minute while you run back. It's no trouble, really.' She starts to protest; I can see her weighing the convenience of going back without the cumbersome stroller versus the potential anger of her employers if they were to find out. 'I don't mind a screaming little one,' I say, looking her in the eye and placing a hand on her arm. 'They live so close. It will only take you a second, right?' She glances back at her employer's house – ten, fifteen steps away,

LAURA SIMS

tops! – then looks back at me. ‘Right,’ she says. ‘Thank you. I won’t be a minute.’ And she speed-walks down the block. So here I am, alone with the actress’s baby. He may be red-faced and screaming, but he is all mine. So delicious, waving his little arms in the air, arching his back against the straps that hold him in. I kneel down in front of him and wriggle my fingers in front of his face, making clucking noises with my tongue. He stares at me and screams even louder, writhes all the more powerfully in his seat. The poor thing! I start to unbuckle him. I will hold him to me, smell his head, brush my lips over his downy hair. But the damn buckles are so complicated, and before I can get him out, the nanny materializes beside me. She pops the pacifier in his mouth, thanks me profusely, and pushes the stroller along up the street.

Just like that, he’s gone. Gone like Nathan. Gone like the baby we never had. I drag myself back up the steps and inside.

Upstairs, everything’s a mess. The cat – the damn cat, Nathan’s cat – has tracked her litter through the kitchen again. I had the leak beneath the sink fixed days ago, but the cabinet still reeks of mildew. Romantic brownstone living! Trash piled in the can, dirty laundry piled in the hamper. Nathan used to do all that – clean up after the cat, take

LOOKER

out the trash, take care of the laundry. I try to keep up but I've been barely functional since he left.

I'm not alone, though, I tell myself: I have my books. My student papers to grade. My students, I suppose. I have my colleagues at school, too – a few, at least, who aren't self-important jerks, lecherous drunks, or socially awkward weirdos. Or all of those rolled into one (which would make: my department chair). I also have two or three old friends, one of whom I see regularly for lunch. That's the sum total of my life, since Nathan left six weeks ago. Oh, and Cat, the stupid cat that Nathan's had since grad school . . . who's now been abandoned just like me. Here we are, unlikely pair in misery, doing our best to stay out of each other's way. I feed her to keep her alive – that's it.

*

I walk past the actress on my way home from the grocery store. Our eyes meet for a moment, then she looks away. *You're ugly*, I think. Without meaning to. But it's true – at least today, in this afternoon light, she looks too raw, too hugely featured. Her eyes bulge, her lips are almost obscenely plush, and her cheekbones jut beneath her thin skin. In the mirror at home, I push my fingers around my face. Small nose, thin lips, and nearly invisible cheek-

LAURA SIMS

bones. But I've got fairy-tale eyes – bright blue, almond shaped. When the actress looked at me today, maybe she thought: *You should be on the screen*. Maybe that's why she had to look away.

We've spoken only once, at last year's block party. The neighborhood kids – including her two girls – were thrashing around inside the net walls of the bouncy house. Grown-ups were gathered in loose circles nearby, sitting on folding chairs or standing, chatting aimlessly, pleased by the excuse to drink beer at noon. I was standing in front of our house with my dish of watermelon and feta orzo salad in hand, waiting for Nathan to come down, when I saw her from the corner of my eye. She walked over to the food table, holding a bag from City Pantry, a gourmet food and kitchen gadgets shop new to the neighborhood. I made a beeline for the table, brandishing my dish. I flashed her a smile. Our eyes met. 'Where's that?' I blurted out, pointing at her bag. 'What?' she said in her famously husky voice. 'Oh. City Pantry. It's just two blocks from here. Delicious stuff.' I nodded, watching her unload container after container of costly gourmet sides: Parmesan roasted acorn squash, portobello mushrooms sautéed in wine, grilled shrimp and octopus salad, braised bacon-wrapped endives – dishes it would take all day for some ragged woman like me to cook. I scrambled

LOOKER

to think of what to say next, how to keep her there with me. ‘Looks good!’ I said at last, hating what must be the desperate-looking grin on my face. But she smiled back, generous soul, and then floated away in her ankle-length burnt-orange sundress and floppy straw hat, back to her beautiful house. I watched her go, feeling melted inside. Like I’d been touched by the warm, immense hand of a goddess. When the feeling left a few moments later, shame replaced it. It crept up my neck in a hot flush. What had I said? ‘Looks good!’ Like some half-wit. Some rube.

I’m interesting! I wanted to shout. *I’m somebody, too!* But then Nathan was beside me, slipping his arm around my waist, and the self-loathing dropped away. After an hour of chatting with neighbors, Nathan at my side, I’d forgotten the whole stupid scene. Well, not the scene, but at least I’d let go of the deep humiliation. I barely turned my head, later, when the actress reappeared, radiant and cool as ever. I could be immune to her sometimes, back then.

There’s a scene in the actress’s second movie, *Girl with Dog*, an earnest indie rom-com, where she tells her friend, ‘Love makes you interesting. It makes *everyone* interesting.’ She delivers the line with such gusto, her green eyes bright and even slightly moist. The friend scoffs and says, ‘Yeah, right. Everyone but me.’

LAURA SIMS

*

Today I decide to throw out all the meds. The Gonal, the Menopur, the Ganirelix Acetate – what *was* all that stuff I was injecting into my body? Hundreds of dollars' worth of chemical compounds meant to make my defective eggs perform correctly for once, that's what. After drinking my coffee-only breakfast, I dump it all in a giant black trash bag: the boxes of prefilled syringes and sterile pads and Band-Aids and alcohol wipes, and their bland, insulting optimism with them. I tie a knot at the top of the bag and carry it downstairs to toss in the bin. I hesitate for a second on the stoop. I could keep the stuff a little longer, in the hopes of finding someone new to drag through the same torturous cycle of hope, elation – our hands clapping and eyes meeting as the doctor describes how beautifully the embryo transfer went – followed by the toxic letdown of 'Not Pregnant' appearing in the window of one of those damn expensive digital pee-sticks. Or I could leave the bag on the street for some other deficiently wombed woman – although from the looks of it around here, everyone but me is doing fine in that department. So forget it. The bag of meds goes in the trash. I'm done.

It feels good. Clean. Empty – like my womb. Ha.

LOOKER

The first appointment at the fertility clinic was the best. Nathan and I had found our solution – hooray! We sat, hands clasped in front of Dr J, nodding our heads in unison at the test results, as if saying, *She understands us, she understands our needs!* And she did. Or so we thought. I spent hours of my life in that waiting room, and in the countless exam rooms the nurses would usher me into – to be weighed, measured, probed, and sometimes inseminated. I kept up a positive attitude for as long as I possibly could – making jokes with the doctor and nurses, offering up my veins to them and willingly splaying my legs. Eventually, all of our savings went down the drain. My marriage, too, though that drained away at a more leisurely pace. And I can't blame it all on the cost and complexity of fertility treatments, can I? Or even on my – no, *our*, the doctor emphasized, but come on, it was *my* – infertility. Nathan was tested and his sperm was 'perfect.' It wasn't him, it was *me*. Dr J herself grew increasingly cold with me as the weeks and months passed. Like I must be one of those *bad* patients, like I must be failing repeatedly on purpose. It wasn't fair – and yet I understood her disgust. I felt it, too.

I went to yoga religiously back in those days. I remember feeling cleansed and purified after the intense hour and a half. Hopeful and hearty. Willowy and strong. Full of Buddhist platitudes and a sense of peace. I tried to keep

LAURA SIMS

going in the days after Nathan left, I tried to ‘clear my mind’ and ‘open my heart’ as the instructor suggested, but I was revolted by the stifling room and the stink of other people’s sweat – and, most of all, by my yoga instructor’s wish for ‘peace everywhere.’ *What about peace here? What about me?* I raged inside.

Just the other day, Mrs H said, ‘Where’s your husband?’ I stared at her. *Where’s yours?* I wanted to say back. *Dead and buried*, she would have had to answer. I envy her that clear resolution. Better to be left for death than for . . . nothing at all, not even another woman! Better to have Nathan snug under the ground than out walking the world without me.

*

I wake with a heavy sludge in my stomach. I dreamed of Nathan last night. He was lost in a crowd of strangers, and I was pushing through the throng to reach him, screaming his name, seeing what I thought was the top of his head just a few feet in front of me. Always out of reach. I woke to nothingness. Dumb cat purring beside me in what used to be Nathan’s spot. My eyes itch just looking at her. I smack my hand down on the comforter and watch the cat rear back. But then she calms, and resettles, as if nothing has happened. As if I’m no one, nothing at all.

LOOKER

*

Nathan and I moved here to be near the park, for our imaginary future brood. Five years later, here I sit, still strategically, uselessly close to the park. I haven't been there in weeks. Months, maybe. What's there for me? *You should exercise more*, Nathan would say, sweat beading his brow after his early morning run around the park's central loop. I'd glare at him over my second cup of coffee. *I'm movie-star thin*, I'd say. *That isn't the point*, he'd counter. And so it went.

Kale shakes. Blueberry-and-banana smoothies, with ginger tossed in. Wheatgrass shots. Hold the bun, please. Gluten-free chips or pretzels. Gluten-free bread. Gluten-free . . . whateverthefuck. Our pantry could have stocked a natural foods shop. I think he thought surely it would rub off on me one day. Especially when the rounds of IVF continued to be unsuccessful. *We should try everything, right?* he'd say, meaning *you* should try everything, waving one of his damn smoothies in my face. *Fuck off*, I'd reply. Did he really think kale would get 'us' pregnant? I was constantly moving his organic crap to the back of the fridge so I could make room for my Diet Cokes and cream cheese.

I thought up ways to murder him, when we fought. I thought I could smother him in his sleep, or lace his kale smoothie

LAURA SIMS

with something untraceable, blame his early death on a (nonexistent) congenital heart condition. *I was always afraid this would happen*, I'd say to the police, wringing my hands. There was one bad blowup we had, when I wanted to take a break, let a few months pass between IVF cycles. This was after several failed cycles in a row, and I felt exhausted by the unending clinic visits followed by the vicious little needle pricks at home, all leading to: zero. Nathan was supposed to be helping – he'd been all too eager to do the injections in the beginning – but as we both gradually lost heart, he left it all to me. There I sat, stabbing my belly and thigh. Alternating between the left and right sides every day. Feeling the medicine burn as it spread, gritting my teeth against the pain. And yet *he* despised the idea of my taking a break! Said we couldn't afford to let any time pass, given 'the state of your eggs.' Accused me of being selfish, negligent, indifferent. I screamed at him that I wanted to rip his head off. And I did want to: I imagined doing it, in graphic detail, after he'd stormed out of the apartment. When he came back we made up, as usual, though each blowup brought us one baby step (ha!) closer to the end.

*

Nathan and I moved into our apartment at the same time another couple moved into the duplex downstairs. Dillon,

LOOKER

the husband, was a software engineer, and Farrah, the wife, worked in pharmaceutical advertising. They were one of the new breed infesting our neighborhood: generic rich folk. I despised them in general but liked them in particular – or tolerated them, anyway. We made a few empty gestures toward getting together, having a drink at one of our places, going out for brunch, but it never materialized. We had our lives; they had theirs. They were always friendly, smiling, and helpful when something went wrong in the building. Then Farrah got pregnant, right in the middle of our baby-making hell.

It was bad enough that I had to watch her huffing up and down the stairs, holding – no, clutching! – the rail like the sanctified vessel she was, carrying what must feel like the world's most precious cargo as her belly grew and grew. But her personality changed, too. She started to send me frosty texts about things in the building that bothered her, especially as she feathered her nest. *Could you or Nathan sweep the stoop once in a while? I've had to do it twice this week.* Or: *Would you move those air-conditioning units out of the downstairs hallway? We'll need to store our stroller there,* she'd write, without preamble of any kind, not even a *Hi!* At first I was accommodating, writing back a cheery *Sure!* And sending Nathan down to do her bidding. But then I'd go upstairs and jab myself with a needle full of some hormone that would give me

LAURA SIMS

insomnia and no babies. No babies no babies no babies. She'd done it effortlessly, she and her husband, at least as far as I knew: he'd stuck his dick in her, the sperm had met the right egg, and presto! The way God intended it. Not this artificial way we were going about things. I thought, too, that Farrah had begun to look at me askance for my blatant unpregnantness. Nathan told me I was imagining it – of course he did! And of course he was right, I agreed, although inside I knew differently. So when her texts grew more and more passive-aggressive, I decided to strike back with passive aggression of my own. I used silence: whenever she sent one of her obnoxious requests, I simply didn't respond. Nathan would sigh, shake his head, and tell me to 'be reasonable.' Did Farrah's husband, the mild-mannered engineer, tell her the same? *Be reasonable, Farrah, they probably can't have kids. Have pity on her.* But I didn't want her damn pity. And as far as I could tell, she wasn't offering it. The looks she gave me weren't sympathetic; they were disapproving. *Why can't she have kids?* they seemed to ask. *What's wrong with her?*

One day, late in her pregnancy, I ran into Farrah in our shared front garden. Rather than her usual scowl, she beamed a brilliant, toothy smile my way and I saw the old her, the charming brunette with the deep brown eyes who got whatever she wanted, including that massive belly. I couldn't help responding in kind. I smiled back. 'Have

LOOKER

you heard of Virtual Doorman?’ she asked, almost gleefully. ‘No,’ I said, instantly on guard. Our doorbell had never worked reliably – sometimes it buzzed, sometimes it didn’t – so Farrah and Dillon had to sign for our packages now and then. As her due date drew nearer, she seemed to find this arrangement increasingly intolerable. *Had to sign for a package while you were out*, she’d text. *I was in the shower when they rang*. I’d grit my teeth and write nothing in return. ‘It’s a service you can install that answers the door when you’re out,’ she said now, in an excited rush. ‘It can even let deliverymen in to drop packages in the downstairs hall. I think it might be just the thing!’ Of course. That explained her sudden upward mood swing. ‘Oh!’ I said, matching her tone. ‘That’s great, we’ll definitely look into it!’ Then I gave her a friendly wave. I promptly forgot about the stupid Virtual Doorman, even after she’d texted me the link to the site.

Fast-forward to two weeks later: Nathan and I were out in the city one Saturday, exploring the waterfront area, holding hands and sipping coffee and feeling positive that this time, this round of IVF had worked. I felt pregnant-ish, I thought. For sure. My boobs were sore, and my very punctual period was at least a day late. Nathan was so inspired that he’d begun doing the injections for me again. All was well. Then my phone dinged with a text

LAURA SIMS

from Farrah. *Just had to sign for another package of yours. Have you ordered the Virtual Doorman yet??* it said. I felt remarkably calm. She couldn't rattle me, not then. I showed the text to Nathan, who raised his eyebrows as if he could finally see what I'd been saying about her. 'You should just say NO, in all caps,' he suggested, and we laughed. So I wrote, *NO*. And a moment later my phone dinged again, like she'd been staring at her screen just waiting for a snarky reply. *Why not?* her text said. It felt like we were circling each other, fists raised, flinging insults, even though neither of us had said anything remotely insulting. *Because I'm busy*, I wrote, knowing that Farrah had just quit her job to stay home with the baby. *Some of us have work to do*, I added. When Nathan read my text, he looked playfully shocked. We high-fived – blissful, triumphant team members that we were. *We won!* I kept thinking all day. Until late at night, when my period came.

Nathan went behind my back and ordered the damn Virtual Doorman, as if we needed a remote service answering our door – as if we could afford it! When I confronted him about it, he shrugged his shoulders to say, *It was fun being on your team while it lasted*. I could sense Farrah's smug satisfaction from two floors up. Is that when things between Nathan and me really began to fray? Or had it already begun, and this just accelerated our undoing?

LOOKER

I watched Farrah's belly grow bigger and bigger, watched her move more and more slowly up the stoop. Meanwhile, I'd gone through two consecutive egg harvestings, a promising embryo transfer, and two weeks later: zip. I'd crammed a whole pineapple down my throat, like all the blogs said to do after IVF, and rested, and taken my folic acid, and still the squirming little life, the tiny light they'd shown me on the ultrasound screen during the procedure, had winked out and died. Why hadn't those slimy progesterone suppositories I'd stuck up me three times a day made my womb hospitable? Why did nothing ever work? Dr J was reserved in offering her condolences this time; she pursed her lips. 'Have you thought about trying acupuncture, too?' she asked. I had no intention of submitting to even *more* needles – I'd had enough of them, and so had my bruised belly – but I didn't say that, I just said I'd think about it. I always said I'd think about it. Telling Nathan the news was difficult, but he swallowed his disappointment and comforted me, told me we'd try again and it would work next time, blah blah blah. I didn't believe it as he said it, and I certainly don't believe it now, knowing he was probably beginning to plan his escape by then.

When the baby came – Farrah's baby – she started making a habit of leaving trash bags filled with dirty diapers outside

LAURA SIMS

her door, presumably for Dillon to take out when he got home from work. I couldn't believe it! Ms Perfect, Ms Persnickety! It wasn't too bad at first, but as the baby grew, his shits started to reek. Jesus. I'd come home midday and it would hit me like a hot, wet, horrible wall: that sickly-sweet, unmistakable odor. *Do you smell that?* I'd ask Nathan. He'd look up distractedly. *What?* As if he lived in a different building, on a different plane. As if it were *me* who stunk, not the precious baby's poop. I started carrying the bags out to the trash. Day after day I did this, and day after day I waited for the text from her that would say, *Thank you, I'm sorry for the smell.* Or *Forgive my laziness and rudeness – you're a lifesaver.* Or *How would I get by without you, neighbor?* I would show it to Nathan and he'd see what a necessary angel I was. Needless to say, the text never came. Eventually Farrah just stopped putting trash bags in the hall, and that was the end of that.

Farrah and Dillon moved out just after Nathan left. She was hugely pregnant with their second child; I was dragging myself around like the newly risen dead. 'We've outgrown the place,' Dillon said cheerfully, when I ran into him one day on the stoop and plastered a smile on my face to distract him from my red-rimmed, puffy eyes. They'd be moving to a condo in the city, he said. A spacious, three-bedroom, two-bath overlooking the river. They'd go on to have a

LOOKER

whole brood, I was sure – like everyone else in this place. The more kids you had, the more prosperous it meant you were. Meanwhile there I sat on the stoop: zero kids, zero husband, a woman-shaped shade. Haunting an apartment that was empty except for my ex-husband's cat.

I despised Dillon and Farrah, but their absence made the house feel even emptier. There seemed to be no sign of new people coming to fill the vacant duplex, either, which was weird, given the cutthroat rental market around here. There were always new suckers to lure in, people willing or desperate enough to pay an extraordinary amount of money for a small set of rooms they could run through like rats. But nothing. No one. I'd begun to suspect that Charles, our absentee landlord, who had raised his children here and then fled to Miami in retirement, was planning to sell the building. He'd bought the place for peanuts years ago, and now he could sell it for \$3 million at least. I imagined he was waiting me out. Last time our lease had come up, Nathan had negotiated a discount in exchange for paying a year's worth of rent in advance – clever man. Now I worried that Charles would kick me out in March, when the lease expired. I could e-mail and ask him point-blank if he planned to sell, of course, and at least resolve the anxiety of not knowing, but I didn't want to draw attention to the situation. As if asking him might give him

LAURA SIMS

the idea to sell, if he didn't have it already. I stayed silent and tried not to think about it – about what I would do or where I would go when the building sold or the money ran out. Next March was still months away.

*

Coffee mug in hand, I watch the actress from three stories up. She holds her baby loosely on her hip and walks at a leisurely pace. She smiles down at him, says something, *goo goo ga ga*, for all I know, and laughs at whatever sounds he makes in response. She seems completely relaxed, her smile real. Not the tight one she's given me when I've passed her on the street. Not the diamond-bright one she gives the cameras. She's wearing that same boho-chic white linen sundress I've seen before – it's deceptively simple but surely expensive. The whiteness shows off her lightly tanned skin, gleaming from whatever weekend beach trip they must have taken recently. The baby waves his arms and squirms against her, so she cuddles him closer, kissing his neck until he laughs. She's a walking advertisement for blissful motherhood. *What on earth is more important or precious than this?* I can almost hear her say for the ad campaign. She would look down at the babe with soft eyes, and he would reach up a chubby hand to pat her face. *Nothing* is the answer. Nothing is more important or precious on this earth.

LOOKER

‘You could adopt,’ Shana says bluntly over lunch in the city. I nearly choke on my mouthful of mustard greens. It takes all my control not to backhand her across the face – with my left hand, the one with the wedding ring (still). She goes on pontificating about adoption, why she and Damon feel so lucky they didn’t have to go that route, but what a viable, worthy route it is, one that would mark me as a saint for the rest of my days – especially as the single mother of an adopted child! What a hero I would be! She doesn’t say *that* outright, of course, but she is so worked up by the end over my imaginary adoption of a needy child (or children!) that her eyes shine with tears. Meanwhile, I haven’t said a word. She must think I’m overcome – with the idea of my imaginary family and my unending gratitude for the stalwart friend who has buoyed me through this dark time with her brilliant advice. She puts her hand over mine before we pay the bill. For a moment I think *she* might pay the bill, in her state of near euphoria, which I *would* be grateful for – but she doesn’t.

When I get home, I wriggle my finger free of the ring at last. There’s a white band of squeezed skin underneath that hasn’t seen light or air in years. Instead of tossing the ring out the window, as part of me would like to do, I set it in the corner of my top dresser drawer, under my overwashed underpants.

LAURA SIMS

*

I walk into class with a frown embedded in my body and soul. As soon as the door shuts behind me, though, I look up and smile. The friendly professor – it’s an act that continues to save me. I set a chilled can of Diet Coke down on the desk, and Bernardo, one of my most outgoing students, points at it. ‘Those’ll kill you, Professor,’ he says. ‘Before cigarettes?’ I ask, lightning-quick. Everyone laughs: Joanne, Simon, Mary, Devon, James, the silent Chloe – and Bernardo, of course. He chuckles and shakes his head. The funny, friendly professor.

It has crossed my mind to fuck one of them. They’re adult students, after all – some are divorced, or have casual girlfriends. It wouldn’t take much. Pulling someone aside – Bernardo maybe, with his dark eyes and extravagant lashes. We’ve talked after class, bantered and flirted a bit. I could just say, ‘Want to get a drink?’ one night. Go freshen my lipstick in the harsh fluorescent light of the school restroom. Have a few glasses of wine at a nearby bar. Touch his leg. Let him take me home and touch me all over.

But that would not be appropriate for someone in my position. For a *professor*. Though I’m hardly a professor. I’m a non-tenure-track lecturer at an overpriced, second-rate city

LOOKER

school, teaching evening classes to returning students. The school seems to be struggling; I've heard rumors, and I can read the signs. My class, Survey of Western Verse II, 1850–Present, a standard in the literature program, was so small that the dean almost axed it at the start of the semester; I had another that *was* cancelled due to low enrollment. In the days just after Nathan left, when I veered from mania to despair and back again, I imagined using my extra time to take kickboxing classes at the local gym, transforming myself into a fighter, like the actress would do in one of her films. But I've gone nowhere near the gym, and I'm still the same person I was weeks ago. Aside from the financial blow, cushioned only by our still-joint savings account, all the class loss has done is make these days even emptier. I should have offered to teach anything – even Intro Composition to freshmen, which I swore I'd never teach again – if only to save myself from these long, blank days.

After class, I come back to my barely maintained, barely still elegant brownstone alone. I climb the stairs, nearly wheezing by the end. The wheezing is new – the consequence of reviving my grad school smoking habit after Nathan left. Though I've never thought, not even once, *I should quit smoking*; I've only thought, *I should move*. We always talked about moving *when the baby came*. Ha. If I were forced to move now, I'd have to leave the neighborhood – and in

LAURA SIMS

many ways, that would be a relief. To escape the entitled, ever-breeding bourgeoisie. I can't sit in a café here, grading or reading, for twenty minutes without some mom coming to buy her kids overpriced pastries while managing them in loudly hushed tones. It does more than grate on my nerves – it drives a spike into my side. Even worse is to look up and see a cherubic face close to mine, eyes blinking at me, curious and killing.

If someone could walk by my window (thankfully they can't; the most they can see from the street is the light from my lamps and the shadow of the slowly turning ceiling fan), they'd see a charmless place, full of Ikea furniture and shabbily stacked books. And a middle-aged woman, alone with a cat, glass of cheap wine in hand. A cliché, a 'cat lady,' a laughingstock.

I never pursued money. I thought it would come to me. I did! I thought the life of the mind would deliver it up in a matter of years – that my PhD in literature, with a specialization in poetry, of all things, would elevate me in ways that weren't merely intellectual. That, in addition to being feted and admired as a scholar of great renown, I would have job security. Health insurance. Steady, and steadily rising, income. 'But who's going to hire you?' Nathan would tease, secure in his practical Doctorate of Education program. I

LOOKER

didn't like to worry over such troublesome details. In grad school, Nathan and I would sit in the library with our heads bent over books, under the green glow of old-fashioned desk lamps. At a corner table, away from the rabble. As I read deeper into John Berryman's *The Dream Songs*, I felt my cheeks flush and my heart rate accelerate. When I couldn't contain my ecstatic fervor anymore – over the strange and glorious diction, the untamed turns of phrase – I shoved the book under Nathan's nose as if to say, *See? This is what matters. This.* At the time, Nathan raised his eyebrows as he scanned the page, and when he finished, he nodded. 'Good stuff,' he said, 'very good,' as if he were praising a child's efforts at drawing instead of the masterful set of poems I'd shared. Such passion for poetry I had back then! That was where 'the life of the mind' took root: what a joke! I could roll on the floor in hysterics at such naïveté now, if it were at all funny. The life of the mind! *FUCK* the life of the mind.

*

In the morning, I head out for one of my long, slow walks. Ever since Nathan left, I've felt the urge to ramble – through our gentrified bubble, out to the edges where the natural foods stores and sparsely filled niche boutiques give way to cramped bodegas and dilapidated hardware stores. Past

LAURA SIMS

those, even, to the old warehouse district near the water, all the way down, once, to the waterfront park where enormous old cranes stand like sentinels over the few illegal fishermen on the pier. At first, going walking was just a way to not feel, after Nathan. Or a different way *to* feel – because I couldn't *not* feel, really, feelings bombarded me, ruled me, yanked me here and there like a sad marionette – but to feel while moving in a forward direction somehow helped, gave me some sense of control. Walking pushed the misery along through my body, distracting me from my grief the way a deep sleep can, though without the sharp pain of waking up. Returning home at the end of a walk was much less horrible – it hurt, but in a dull, dry, mostly bearable way, that at least made me feel anchored in something, in my tired and aching body instead of my pulverized heart.

I once stopped in a church – in the early, desperate days – and pushed into the dim, silent interior. Got awkwardly to my knees on one of the velvet-padded knee rests and bent my head, and prayed, or tried to pray. *What if the actress could see me now – what would she think?* I wondered, kneeling there. Would she study me, as if for a potential future role? Take note of the angle at which I inclined my head? Or the way I clasped my hands together, like a child? The way my body shook with sobs, and shook harder, perhaps, at the thought of her watching?

LOOKER

Or would she glance at me and simply shake her head? *Peasants*, she'd think. *Always throwing themselves on the mercy of the divine.*

Nothing happened in the church that day. No angels descended on a wave of iridescent light. No booming voice told me I'd recover, that everything would turn out fine. I struggled to my feet after a while, feeling, at least, wholly cried out for the time being.

Coming back from my walk a few hours later, I see a large cardboard box in front of the actress's house. It wasn't there when I left, but how long has it been sitting there? What did I miss? I breeze right past my own building and speed-walk to number 202. Like everyone else around here, like one of *the people*, the actress puts out her family's castoffs on a fairly regular basis – books they've finished, shoes and clothes they've outgrown, furniture they no longer want, etc. – for passersby to pick up. Our neighborhood is a kind of slow-trickle flea market. You can grab a board game from the steps of one house, then walk a block or two and find a cute handbag. Or a DVD collection. Or a Lego set. Nathan and I found this incredibly charming, not to mention useful, when we first moved here. The actress – or one of her *staff*, I'm sure – arranges her giveaways neatly in a box, or hangs them from the spikes of the fence, or lines

LAURA SIMS

them up below it, on the sidewalk itself. I've snagged every single thing of hers I've seen, sometimes coming home with armfuls of sweaters and kids' rain boots, or teetering up the stairs (once) with a heavy, ornate side table. I like to think I've gotten everything she's ever put out, but is that even possible? Surely I've missed things when I was at work, or out of town, or simply not paying enough attention. As I get closer to the box, my heart pounding in my chest, I wonder if anyone beat me to this particular haul. The box is still there, but is everything in place? I wish I could present the actress with an inventory list so I could know for certain that I have it all.

Then a neighbor turns out of her own gate, right in front of me, and blocks my view of the box. *She's heading straight for it.* I arrive just behind her, panting and sweating. 'Hi,' she says, but I'm staring down intently, cataloguing the contents. There's a pile of bound and published screenplays of 1990s films like *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*; a small rectangular mirror framed in mother-of-pearl; and a wooden elephant on wheels. This is a good haul. A *very* good haul. I finally look up at the neighbor. She's around my age, with a head of frizzy gray-brown hair and horn-rimmed glasses sliding down her nose. *There's nothing for you here, sister,* I want to snarl. *Move along.* I watch tensely as she bends down and picks up the top screenplay, the one for

LOOKER

Glengarry Glen Ross. As she flips the pages, I stand there saying, *Drop it. Drop it. Drop it.* In my head, over and over. Finally, she looks up, smiles awkwardly, and . . . just when I think she might try to walk off with the prize, just when I imagine ripping it from her hands . . . she tosses it carelessly back in the box – like it’s trash! – and walks off. I want to lean against the actress’s fence in relief, but there’s no time. I pick up the whole box and carry it home, feeling happiness well up inside me for the first time in days.

At first, Nathan teased me lightheartedly about my fixation on the actress’s discarded belongings, but by the end I was sure he meant his remarks to hit my tender spots. ‘Why do you want that thing?’ he said once, frowning at a colorful rattle I’d collected. This was after failed IVF cycle number four. Or five. I’m not sure. They all blur together after a while. What he meant was, *Why do you want that stuff if you can’t even have a baby?* I accused him of being cruel. He said he hadn’t meant it that way, it was just that we didn’t have the room to store extra things, but of course we did – we had the ‘baby’s room.’

That’s not what we called it. We called it ‘the study’ because there was a (mostly unused) desk in there. We called it ‘the guest room’ because there was a twin bed in there, the one I’d dragged with me from one apartment to the next

LAURA SIMS

since grad school. We called it ‘the storage room’ because there were two closets in there, crammed with family photo albums, old books, clothes, and a beach umbrella for our infrequent trips to the shore. But we never, ever, called it ‘the baby’s room,’ though we both knew very well that’s what it would be, should be, should have been. Of course, in my own head, I’d already renovated it – thrown out the old twin, finally, organized the closets and put unwanted items, the refuse of our younger years, out front, and moved the desk to a corner of the living room. Put up a playful border. Installed a crib with a mobile of black-and-white squares hanging over it. Added a dresser and changing table, and a child’s small table and chairs. I’d even moved things around – in my head – throughout the years of our trying. Put the crib closer to the window, then away from it to lessen the noise from the street. Pulled down one border, a girly one, and put up another with trains and airplanes. Then I replaced that with a gender-neutral one patterned with triangles, circles, and squares in grays and blacks – like the mobile. I’d patted my round belly. Smoothed my hands over the firm dome of flesh. Sunk into the tacky calico-patterned glider and rocked myself to sleep.

Later, I saw one pair of worn, thong-style Birkenstocks out in front of their house. A woman’s size 8, I’d guess. Probably *hers*. Got ‘em.