

Killing Aphids

It took Ezra all day to kill the aphids on the rosebushes in his backyard. He hadn't meant to do this. He'd meant to go to the Clarkson's and install the new toilet. But the day was cool and crisp, the sky a solid blue, and after a week of sweltering heat, the morning seemed close to a miracle. This feeling was reinforced, or perhaps even caused by the orange roses that glowed in the morning sun. Instead of heading straight to his van, Ezra walked across the narrow lawn, past its single tree to admire the blossoms up close. The petals spiraled open and arched back in perfect sequence until the outside most petal looked in danger of falling off. This orderly progression pleased him, and the fact that these roses were his, that he actually owned them, also pleased him. Ezra dug into his pocket for his collapsible magnifying glass, unfolded it and positioned it over a petal, bumping the flower ever so slightly and up they flew, into his eyes, his nose, his mouth – the tiny powdery-white bugs.

He jerked back, swatted at the flying things but they were too small to swat. One stuck to his lip so he picked it off and studied it under the glass. All that remained was a pile of white mush with a few yellowish threads of legs sticking out. This wasn't Ezra's first encounter with aphids. His battle with them had begun long ago in his apartment where they'd infested his house plants with their fat little larvae and tufts of white powdery sap. He'd learned to be on the lookout for the little white fliers and knew to get rid of them as soon as possible. But this was the first time he'd noticed them outside, on his roses, and he was angry. No, more than angry. The fact that these little vampires were sticking their proboscises into his roses violated his aesthetic sensibility – his sense of being, however briefly, in the presence of a miracle. So Ezra started to kill the aphids one by one, petal by petal, leaf by leaf, mashing them between his thumb and forefinger then wiping their carcasses on his pants.

The back door slammed shut and Carrie called out. "Aren't the roses incredible?"

Ezra didn't look up. He didn't want to lose track of which leaves he'd cleaned and which he hadn't.

"Don't you love our new house?" Carrie asked. "I love our roses. I love our tree. I even love our one-car garage."

Ezra didn't know how to respond to his wife's enthusiasm so he said nothing. The house still made him nervous – the increased responsibilities and financial burdens it represented. But at certain moments, like with the roses or after painting the ceiling in the living room, he'd felt a similar rush of enthusiasm. He hadn't admitted these moments to Carrie because he didn't understand them. Before meeting Carrie, he'd told all his friends that he'd never get married, never buy a house and never have kids. Now, at forty-three, he'd gone and done two out of three of those things, and as a result, frequently felt disoriented.

"Is there something wrong with the roses?" Carrie asked.

"Just a few bugs," Ezra said.

"Yuck. I hope they're not the big fat squishy kind."

Ezra glanced back at his wife. She was walking towards him. "No, they're the little white ones." He held out his hand to show her the flattened aphids.

"Ewww," she said, and pushed his hand away.

Ezra felt a weight, like a thick black tarp, lift from his body when Carrie's car finally backed down the driveway. He couldn't say exactly why, only that he could be himself again. Plus now he could work without interruption. He figured it would take a couple hours to kill the aphids, then he'd go to Home Depot, buy the parts he needed and hook up the Clarkson's new toilet before the end of the day.

But the infestation was worse than he thought. He worked for nine hours, stopping only twice, once to eat and once to talk to the nosy lady next door. He killed methodically from top to bottom, left to right, challenging himself to see how many aphids he could dispatch in a minute without snagging himself on the thorns. He used both hands and knew, almost without looking, where the aphids were hiding and where their eggs would be. Every half hour or so, he

took a few steps back to stretch his legs and admire his progress. The flowers he'd cleared of bugs seemed to glow a brighter orange.

The phone rang a couple of times and Ezra let the answering machine take the calls. He only answered phones when he felt like talking and he usually knew who was calling and why. The first ring was Tiny Clarkson wondering where he was. The Clarksons were an older couple and Ezra had been working on their house on and off for years. They paid him forty dollars an hour and Tiny made him delicious lunches and let him swim in their pool. She treated him like a son even though she already had two of her own – Tom who lived in L.A. and wrote screenplays, and Bobby who was autistic and lived in a group home but visited frequently. Ezra didn't like Tom because he was cocky and self-centered and treated Ezra like a non-person. Tiny always apologized for Tom after he left. She shook her head and said, he never used to be like that, I don't know what's happened to him. But Ezra loved Bobby. Before getting married, Ezra used to play with Bobby for hours at a stretch. Once he took Bobby for a three-day hike on the Appalachian Trail.

The second call was from Carrie. She always phoned from the day care center to leave a message for Ezra when he got home from work. She'd tell a funny story about something the kids had done, then announce her errands and what time she'd be home. Ezra liked hearing about the kids.

It was after five when he finished killing the aphids. Although Ezra never wore a watch, he knew the time because of the roar of rush hour traffic on the highway. He pulled up a lawn chair and sat down. Bees came and went. So did an occasional butterfly and Ezra felt good about himself, about the enormity of his accomplishment, as if he'd wiped out an evil and pernicious foe. He figured he must have killed at least three or four thousand aphids while sustaining only a few scratches himself.

He would've liked to sit there for the rest of the evening meditating on the bushes whose structures he now knew by heart. Each plant seemed to have its own character, its own way of growing, a quality he found inexplicable yet reassuring. Plus, his back and knees ached but he had to get to the park by six o'clock for a soccer game. So he stood up, jogged in place for a minute then went to grab the sweat shirt he'd left under the first bush he'd cleared of bugs. As he

bent over, he saw, out of the corner of his now well-trained eye, an aphid resting on the crest of a petal's curl. Had he missed one? He reached in to smush it and a dozen others swirled up into the air.

Ezra stood stiff with disbelief. Where had these new aphids come from? How did they know to still come to this spot? If he hadn't spent the day killing them, would the bushes be infested by now? What was it about his roses that attracted them so? They weren't even the kind that smelled. The thought that he might be a fool for having wasted his day killing aphids shot through his brain but was quickly disarmed and transformed into blind fury. He picked up his sweat shirt and swatted at the bushes. More aphids flew up. So he swatted and swatted and swatted. Orange petals flew everywhere. He blamed everything on Carrie and the new house. If they hadn't bought this house he wouldn't have cared about the roses. What was happening to him?

He worried that the nosy neighbor might be watching and stopped swatting. The row of bushes looked like a truck had backed into them. The stalks were bent or broken off and the remaining flowers reduced to empty nubs. As quickly as he could, Ezra swept the orange petals into a pile on top of his sweat shirt then cut off the bent stalks with his pocket knife. He threw the ruined flowers behind the garage then went into the house, put the intact flowers in a clear glass vase on the kitchen table and sprinkled the loose petals around it. The arrangement was extravagant and would melt Carrie's already melted heart. Then Ezra ran upstairs, jumped in the shower and started to feel good again about what he'd done. No, the day had not been wasted. He'd done a very worthwhile thing. He'd given his roses a few aphid-free hours, and a day they would remember as the best in their lives.

Sheila spent much too much time looking out the window. She'd even moved her computer into the dining room because from there she could spy on the new neighbors. Usually she lost interest after a few weeks – there had been five families in the house next door since she'd moved in – but not this time. The woman seemed normal enough but the man was odd. Sheila couldn't say exactly why – it's not like he sat around drinking beer with a shotgun across his lap waiting for a squirrel to come into view. He just did everything a little bit

differently. He cut the lawn with a push mower. He took the garbage out every morning, a little brown bag of it taped shut with a single length of duct tape. He even parked his van differently – tucked between the old picket fence and the garage, in a spot so narrow he had to climb out the back door. And the man was a pleasure to look at – tall and skinny but with well-defined muscles, smooth bronze-hued skin and jet black hair cut so short she could see the shine of his scalp.

Sheila told her husband Roger that she'd moved her computer because she was having trouble with her close-up vision (which she was), and that the doctor had said it would be good for her eyes to look up and out every so often (which he had). Uh-huh, Roger said, you just have the hots for our new neighbor. That's right, she said, no more dull afternoons waiting for the postman. They made love that night with a little more vigor than normal after which Sheila thought it could be advantageous to their marriage to have a good-looking oddball living next door.

But today she'd become convinced the guy was crazy. He'd spent all morning fussing with the ancient rosebushes that lined the far side of his backyard. She couldn't make out what he was doing until she resorted to binoculars – something she vowed she'd never do – and saw that he was picking something off the bushes then wiping it on his pants. A fungus, a slime, a bug? Sheila didn't know that much about roses except for that they needed lots of attention.

Her work wasn't going well and she blamed this on the new neighbor. How was she supposed to concentrate in the proximity of such strangeness? Her desk and floor were littered with sheets of paper covered with pen and ink sketches. She was trying to make the initials JBT look like they were flying for John and Bob's Travel Agency. She'd tried JBTs with wings, on wings, slanted, stacked and in orbit around the earth. But the letters were all wrong, especially the B. The B was too bulbous to fly with the J and T. Finally, she felt like she was going around in circles herself and couldn't stand the mystery any longer so she went outside to water the flowers even though it had rained the night before.

If Sheila stood close enough to the picket fence, she could see over the top and watch the man wriggling around under the bushes. At first she stole

surreptitious glances while watering the day lilies and the lilacs but the man never looked up from his work. So she stopped watering and stared. He worked fast, with both hands, the way she'd seen people pick cotton in the movies. But she still couldn't make out exactly what he was doing. She wished she'd taken the time to introduce herself, to bring them a bottle of wine as a housewarming gift so that she could jump right in with small talk. She was about to give up and go back inside, make herself some coffee and close the blinds when the man climbed out from under the bushes and caught her staring at him.

"Gorgeous day," she blurted out.

"Yes," he said, then took a knife out of his pocket and scraped something off his jeans.

"Is there something wrong with the roses?"

"No," he said, not looking up.

"They're beautiful."

"Yes," he said, this time with feeling. He wiped the knife on the grass, folded it up, put it in his pocket then looked straight at her. "Today they are the most beautiful things in the world."

"Yes," she said. "Yes, they are." And they were.

"Are you cleaning them?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, then went back to work on the next bush.

Sheila saw the tiny bugs fly up, like bits of dust in the sunlight, and watched her neighbor chase them with his lightning fast hands and squish them one by one between his fingers. He was killing aphids. For five hours he'd been killing aphids. This gave Sheila a slight chill and rendered her speechless. She turned away and hurried back into the house. What kind of man spends all day killing aphids? What other twisted things did such a man do? She felt sorry for his wife and wondered if she'd have to wash his aphid-soaked pants. Then she wondered why she was wasting her precious time worrying about her crazy neighbor when she had a deadline and her kids would be back from camp in two days. She stopped in the doorway that led from the kitchen to the dining room and stared at the white paper strewn about the room. The little black doodles looked like bugs, hundreds of them, beetles and ants. This vision spooked her,

perhaps she was losing it too, or maybe insanity was contagious like the flu. She lowered the blinds, sat down at her desk and pushed the loose papers onto the floor. She centered herself over a fresh pad, grabbed a new pen and drew a perfect JBT surrounded by little planes going off in all directions. Anywhere, anytime, she jotted down underneath the logo. And that was it. She was done. Sheila sat stunned for a moment, still slightly disoriented but also quite pleased.

She would treat herself to a slice of blueberry pie with ice cream before launching into the mindless but time-consuming tasks of layout and presentation. She headed into the kitchen but stopped, once again, in the doorway. Their little house had turned gloomy with the blinds down so she pulled them back up, letting in the brilliant yellow light, and there he was, crouching, still grabbing at the leaves. But now, from a distance and after the initial shock had worn off, her neighbor looked quite harmless. He was determined and thorough, not bad qualities in a man. Next time they met, she'd introduce herself, invite him and his wife over for a drink.

Carrie sat at her sewing table in the dining room and stared out the window at the picket fence. It needed a fresh coat of paint and some of the pickets were broken or missing. She was having trouble concentrating on the dress she was designing for Mrs. Fillbrook. She blamed this on the roses – the sight of them on the kitchen table as she walked in the back door made her weak in the knees – and the fact that Ezra didn't go to the Clarkson's today. What had he done instead? After four years together, he was still largely a mystery to her but Carrie had never loved a man as much as she loved Ezra. She couldn't wait for him to come home so that she could wrap herself around his body and do it on the kitchen table with rose petals glued to her skin and tangled in her hair. Living in her own house with a man she could call her husband made her happy and relentlessly horny, and now it looked like Ezra might be coming around to her point of view. How else to explain the romantic bouquet? Maybe he'd stayed home to work on the house – a surprise project he'd reveal only when it was done. Maybe he'd finally agree to having a baby.

Carrie redoubled her efforts to focus on the dress. Time was of the essence because Mrs. Fillbrook's daughter was getting married in three weeks.

Although the purple chiffon was inherently ugly and difficult to work with, the bigger problem was Mrs. Fillbrook herself. She stood five foot three inches tall and weighed well over two hundred pounds. Carrie had adjusted her manikin as short and wide as it would go but she still had to wrap sheets around the hips and bust to match Mrs. Fillbrook's 44 by 38 by 48 dimensions. Carrie was used to making slinky dresses for her skinny friends and had no experience with short and wide. She'd made several trips to the oversize stores at the mall for inspiration where she'd seen a lot of draping so she'd tried to drape the fabric every conceivable way but always ended up with a frumpy mess. The strong thin verticals of the picket fence gave her the idea of experimenting with pleats. She was determined to come up with something brilliant because there would be a lot of wealthy people at the wedding and the dress could lead to more commissions. She dreamed of designing clothes full time.

With much effort, Carrie folded pleats into the recalcitrant cloth. When they looked right, she ran the fabric under the sewing machine using a wide loose stitch to secure the folds which she'd then iron into place. She imagined using pleats in a totally new way – over the shoulders, down the back, between the bust and the waist, wherever a thinning effect was needed. She pulled the fabric away from the machine, cut the threads then felt a prickling in the small hairs on the back of her neck. Ezra was home. She swiveled around in her chair and there he stood, just inside the back door, exhausted and covered with mud.

"How long have you been standing there?" she asked in mock anger. Without waiting for an answer, she sashayed into the kitchen, whispered, the roses are beautiful, thank you, in his ear, then gave him a big juicy kiss on the lips which he returned. They stood like that, next to the kitchen table, with only their lips touching, for more than a few seconds then Carrie laughed and picked a clump of mud off Ezra's forehead. The sex would have to wait. Mud was not part of Carrie's ravishment fantasy.

"Did you win?" Carrie asked.

"Two – zero. It was an excellent game." Ezra went to the fridge, grabbed the carton of orange juice and took one long swig. As he leaned back, bits of dried mud broke off his shirt and fell to the floor.

"I gotta take a shower," Ezra said, put the juice back and walked out of the kitchen.

"Mrs. Clarkson called, wondering where you were," Carrie called out after him.

"I know," Ezra said, not stopping.

"You stayed home?"

"Yes."

Carrie waited for an explanation but all she heard was his feet padding up the stairs.

"Did you not feel well?" she shouted while her fingers absent-mindedly sifted through the orange petals.

"I spent the day..." he said, and then she couldn't hear the rest.

Carrie sprinted into the living room and stopped at the base of the stairs. "You spent the day doing what?"

"Cleaning the rosebushes," he said.

"Cleaning the rosebushes?" Carrie looked down at the petals still in her hand.

"Yes."

"I didn't know that they were dirty."

"Yes," he said. "With aphids."

"With aphids?" Carrie asked, letting the petals drop to the floor.

"Yes," he said.

"Why?"

"Because I felt like it."

Carrie wanted to follow Ezra upstairs, press him for details because she couldn't understand why anyone would waste their entire day killing aphids when there had to be a spray that did the job in minutes. But she didn't want to risk an argument and spoil their chance for a romantic evening, so she went back to the dress and realized in a single glance that the pleats were the worst idea she'd had yet. She tore out the tacking stitch and fought back tears. Why was she so unhappy when she was so happy?

Carrie threw the horrid purple fabric on the floor, walked the short length of the house to the back door and stared out at the rosebushes. They looked the

same as they had that morning but with fewer blossoms. Then she wandered into the living room and collapsed on the couch. She lay with her arms clasped tightly across her chest and stared at the ceiling that Ezra had painted black. How much longer would she be able to pretend that certain things didn't matter? While she slaved away at the day care center then struggled to design dresses for dowdy old ladies, her husband had spent the day killing aphids then kicking a ball around on the grass. She hadn't wanted a normal man but she didn't like playing the straight woman either. After all, she was a clothing designer, an inventor of the elegant and outrageous. But since they'd bought this house, the craziness had drained right out of her. There was the mortgage, the car payments and the furniture payments. The roof needed to be resingled and the basement flooded after a heavy rain.

And why was he playing so much soccer all of a sudden? She'd imagined candlelit dinners followed by long sensual evenings in their new house. But now they made love only once a week, if that. Ezra was always too tired or too busy. How was she going to get pregnant when they hardly ever had sex, when Ezra refused to come inside her, outside her or anywhere else as far as she knew? He'd explained to her at least a dozen times that sex was more enjoyable when he didn't come and that coming always put him in a bad mood afterward but she kept hoping, that in a moment of passion, he'd forget himself.

She didn't understand what was happening – why there was suddenly so much distance between them. As she lay on the couch she felt herself becoming very normal and very tired and closed her eyes. Her body ached from the daily pummelings of small children. All she wanted now was for Ezra to finish his shower, lie down next to her and pay her lots and lots of attention.

"He spent all day killing what?" Roger asked as he lay in bed next to his wife after having had sex twice, once with Sheila on top and once with Sheila lying on her back while he kneeled on the floor next to the bed.

"Aphids!" Sheila said. "It was the craziest thing."

"Aphids? You mean those little grubby things that get all over the tomatoes?"

"Yes."

“Why?”

“I don’t know. He wouldn’t say. But he killed them one by one, with his fingers.” She held her hands up and pinched at the air. “It gave me the creeps.”

“Good,” Roger said, and made a ghoulish face.

Sheila feigned horror and Roger plunged at her neck, nipping her slightly.

“Stop it,” she said, pinching his left buttock. “You’ve had enough. I’m exhausted.”

“Okay, sorry. Sweet dreams Esmerelda,” he whispered, then gently kissed the soft spot above her ear.

“Good night Thor,” she mumbled, pulled the blanket up over her head and fell asleep.

But Roger, uncharacteristically, lay awake wondering what kind of man spent his day killing tiny harmless bugs. Roger had spent his day lending or not lending people money. Today he’d allowed a newly married couple to buy their first home and given an older retired couple a home equity loan so that they could add another bedroom and bath to their summer house for the grandkids. He refinanced six mortgages, foreclosed on two condos, one house and denied two men a business loan to start a travel agency.

How did the man next door qualify for a mortgage when he spent his days killing aphids? People like him worried Roger. If everyone was like his new neighbor, no one would qualify for a loan and Roger would be out of a job. Sure, it had been a beautiful day. Sure, he would have liked to have thrown a kayak on the roof of his car and headed for the river. The thought had actually flashed through his mind during lunch but he dismissed it almost before he thought it. The bank allowed two weeks paid vacation plus five paid sick days but no days off for tending aphid-infested rosebushes or kayaking. But what if they did? What if once or twice a year he could call in and tell his boss, Dick, it snowed two feet last night and I’m going skiing. Great Roger, enjoy yourself, you’re doing an excellent job here at the bank and I’ll get Greg to cover for you. Roger fell asleep imagining himself carving elegant crescent turns in knee-deep powder.

* * *

The Clarksons didn't have sex that night, or the night before that or the night before that. As a matter of fact, they hadn't had sex in seven years, since 1995 in a lumpy bed in Oaxaca where they'd gone to celebrate their fortieth anniversary. The sex was forgettable but he could still taste the delicious green chili omelet he'd had for breakfast the next morning. Good food plus fancy hotels seemed to have become a substitute for sex in old age. Not that the Clarksons weren't still in love.

That night David and his wife Tiny lay side by side on their king-sized bed and argued about Ezra and the fact that he hadn't shown up for work again. Their bathroom had been out of commission for five weeks and David was tired of walking to the other end of the house in the middle of the night to take a leak. More often than not, by the time he got back into bed he was wide awake. David wanted to fire Ezra but Tiny wouldn't hear of it. She defended his craftsmanship, his ingenuity and the fact that he was recently married and had just bought a house. David agreed with all of these things but the stock market had fallen three thousand points and the mutual fund he managed was down thirty percent and the year was only half over. He'd lowered his expectations. Ten percent growth would be fine, thank you. Or even eight. All he really had to do was beat fixed income. All he really wanted to do was pee in his own toilet.

"Why don't you just pee into a bucket or something," Tiny suggested.

"Fuck the bucket," he said, threw the paperback history of the Taliban at the TV and lurched out of bed. He paced back and forth in their luxuriously large bedroom. "Fuck the market, fuck Bush, fuck every CEO who ever existed, and fuck Ground Zero."

He collapsed in the Ettore Sottsass chair and stared at the painted wooden door from India that hung on the wall.

"I'll tell Ezra to hook up the new toilet tomorrow," Tiny said.

David felt sucked dry, as if some invisible monster had drained him of his vital fluids. This wasn't how it was supposed to be. He was seventy-two, celibate, half-broke and acting like an imbecile – like his son Tom. He should have left Tiny years ago, moved to the Sierra Mountains where they had real fish and girls who could dance the two-step. David lost himself in this fantasy until

Tiny sighed, put down her book, some novel – she read so many he couldn't keep track any more – turned off her light and went to sleep. She didn't even ask him to turn his off his light which she always did so that he had to use a clamp-on light or read in the Sottsass chair where he'd invariably fall asleep and wake up an hour later with a stiff neck.

David studied Tiny's body which was only partly covered by the sheet. He could make out the major curves and hollows through her slightly transparent nightgown, see the darkness of a nipple and the shadow of the space between her breasts. Her too-blonde hair loosely framed her pretty face which looked much like it did when they first met. This thought made him ache with loneliness and desire. He knew that there were many different kinds of loneliness and that he'd never have the courage to leave Tiny, and that he wouldn't know what to do with a girl who knew how to two-step anyway.

After the long trip to the other end of the house and a pitiful dribbling into his grown sons' toilet, he curled up against Tiny, felt himself harden slightly then soften again, and fell asleep.

After his shower, Ezra fell asleep on the bed, naked except for a towel wrapped around his waist. He hadn't meant to fall asleep. He'd meant to go back downstairs to talk with Carrie and help make dinner. He wanted to tell her what an amazing day he'd had, how each rosebush was different, how the blossoms glowed after he'd cleared them of aphids, how his fingertips felt fat and hot and numb all at once. How he wondered if there was some sort of toxin in aphids that made them feel this way. But he'd sat on the bed, felt a sharp pain in his lower back and lay down. When he closed his eyes, he experienced the sensation of being back at the roses killing aphids. Interesting the way his mind insisted on this activity.

I love you.

The words drifted into his head. Ezra felt the mattress shift, then Carrie's lips on his shoulder.

"Sleeping," he mumbled.

She kissed his chest. "Not anymore."

"Too tired." He swatted at her weakly.

"I want to make love," she said. Her hand moved down his arm to his hip.

"My back hurts," Ezra said, then reached for the blanket at the foot of the bed.

Carrie helped lift the blanket up then crawled under with him. He turned away. She wrapped her leg around his waist and ran her finger lightly down the side of his face, around the curve of his ear. "I love your ears."

Ezra batted at her hand. "I need to sleep."

He tried to pull the blanket up over his head but Carrie yanked it off.

"No you don't!" she shouted, then jumped off the bed and stomped around to his side. She switched on the reading light and stood above him, her face lit from below, distorted by fury and long, root-like shadows.

"You spend all day killing aphids on a bunch of perfectly self-sufficient roses then you won't spend five minutes with me. Well, I've got bugs..." she said, and whipped off her shirt. "That need to be removed. You can't see them but they're there. They're crawling all over me and only you can get rid of them – one by one in a thorough, relentless search until I tell you they're all gone."

By the time she stopped, she'd taken off all her clothes and stood before him naked, breathing hard. For a few seconds he stared at her, stunned by her performance. Then he noticed something on her belly, a bit of lint or thread so he reached out and plucked it off with his thumb and forefinger, and Carrie smiled. It was easy to make her happy. Sometimes he wondered why he resisted her so.

Ezra sat up, feet on the floor and plucked at her thigh, her waist, her belly button with his numb fingertips. He pretended to eat the things he'd plucked and licked his lips. Now Carrie was giggling. He reached out, grabbed her by the waist, pulled her toward him, plucked at her nipple. He plucked and plucked and plucked until Carrie dove on top of him and pinned his arms down.

"Now it's my turn," she said.

Carrie and Ezra made love for a long time that night and even though Ezra was vigilant and pulled out quite frequently, a few stalwart little sperm snuck through and penetrated Carrie's, as it turned out, eggs. After making love,

they were both wide awake so they dressed and went outside where they drank hot tea, ate grilled cheese and tomato sandwiches, and looked for shooting stars. The next morning, Carrie and Ezra didn't wake up until after ten. Carrie called in sick because she really did feel a bit odd and wanted to wallow in the afterglow. Ezra left her sitting in the dining room staring at the fat manikin and by the time he came back that afternoon the purple fabric was smartly arranged and pinned in place. Carrie couldn't explain how she'd worked out the design.

Mr. Clarkson stayed home from work the next day and when Ezra didn't show up by nine and didn't answer his phone, Mr. Clarkson became so furious that he had a heart attack and died. Ezra arrived at their house just in time to see Mr. Clarkson's sheet-covered body carried out on a gurney and slid into an ambulance. Before anyone saw him, Ezra backed out the long driveway and drove around the countryside in a daze until it was time to go home. For two weeks he answered the phone every time it rang. Finally he called the Clarksons only to discover that their phone had been disconnected. The next day he drove over to the house and saw a For Sale sign on the lawn.

Sheila and Roger eventually came to know Carrie and Ezra quite well after discovering their mutual fondness for barbecued meat. They grew tired of walking down the driveway to get to each other's house, especially Carrie as she became increasingly pregnant, so they tore down the picket fence. On April 27th, Omar and Eva were born. When they got home from the hospital the following evening, Ezra stacked the old pickets in a Tower-of-Babel spiral in the driveway and set them on fire. He passed out bottles of champagne to whoever showed up which included the police and the fire department who, upon being taken upstairs to the nursery, let Ezra off with a warning.

Sheila babysat quite frequently for the twins which was a good thing for Sheila because her graphic design work slowed to a trickle along with the economy, and she'd be damned if she was going to go back to school to learn how to be a mammogram technician which is what the career counselor she'd forked over one hundred and fifty dollars to had recommended. Sheila's attraction to Ezra, a secret she kept until her dying day, continued to fuel her sex life with Roger, whose salary and weight-gain marched in lock step, until it was no longer an option as to who was on top.

A year to the day that Omar and Eva were conceived, Carrie had the idea of making an all white cape with a deep fold down the back which she presented to Ezra when he got home from work, and Ezra, who much to his surprise, loved being a father more than anything he had ever done, wore the cape every year on the anniversary of the day he spent killing aphids, which amused his son and daughter to no end although they couldn't say why.

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