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Just Outside of Comfort

Amy Neswald

The afternoon before the rapture, Eve scrubbed her house from top to bottom. She set the timer on the bread maker for a loaf of country bread. She baked two dozen raisin muffins and prepared a week's worth of dinners for her husband and boys, should they decide to come home from college. She washed the laundry. She ironed her husband's white shirts. She weeded the garden beds. Should the apocalypse occur while she was sleeping, she was good to go.

The morning after the rapture, the Texas Ash stood in the backyard, unscathed. Her husband was a dead weight on the pillow, sleeping. The walls of her bedroom were still the color of wilting roses. By all appearances, the rapture had not taken place. She lay in bed all day and claimed a migraine when her husband asked about dinner.

The second day after the rapture that didn't happen, Eve dragged herself out of bed. She took a shower and washed her hair. She wriggled into her jog bra and tennis skirt and sped walked the three mile loop around the subdivision, but her heart wasn't in it. She wasn't sorry that she had donated twenty-five dollars to Reverend Harris's radio campaign. She had hoped that he was right, that God was watching her cleaning house, caring for kin, keeping her flock fat and happy. She toiled, she tried, she smiled even when she didn't want to. She felt certain that she was on the short list. But God, it turned out, didn't care about clean houses.

On the fourth day after the rapture that didn't happen, she heard an ambulance pull up the street. It rolled into her neighbor's driveway. She watched from the picture window as the EMTs rang the doorbell, then pounded on the door, then stood back and waited for nothing to happen. When they disappeared around back, she pulled another dozen muffins, blueberry, from the oven, tested each one for rawness with a butter knife, and decided they were done. She stepped into the bitter Texas heat, eyes burning from the sharpness of the afternoon sun. The air was still, the crows slept on the wire, the ambient whine of electricity muted by the subdivision homes.

She stood on the corner of her neighbor's drive and waited for the EMTs to reappear.

Shortly, one of the two swung around, a cigarette wagging between his sausage lips. His cheeks were red with spider webs, broken capillaries. A patch of whiskers stood defiant on the right side of his chin.

"What happened?" Eve asked.

The EMT shrugged. "Dead," he said. "Heart attack. In the middle of cooking dinner. Didn't even get to taste it."

"That's terrible."

"Poor guy. Didja know him?"

"He's my neighbor," she said, "of course I knew him."

Buzz Rice was the owner of Phillips Rice Used Car Dealership, Route 10. In the middle of the lot, there was a white mast with a digital countdown clock on one side, and a list of new cars on the other. An orange sky-guy was tied to the clock's highest rim and danced, sucking in air, letting it go, one emphysemic gulp at a time. Everyone knew Buzz.

The EMT lit his cigarette and pulled a gurney from the cab of the ambulance. The wheels clattered down. From an interior shelf, he plucked a folded body bag, one of five, and tossed it on the gurney bed. "Well, how well does anyone know anyone anyway, right?"

"Dead," she said. She shook her head slowly from side to side.

"That's life," he said. He wheeled the gurney past Buzz's blooming forsythia and in through the back door.

Eve opened his mailbox. Catalogs and charity appeals. She neatened the stack. She yanked a handful of bufflegrass and kicked wood chips back into the flower bed. She watched a cloud split in two. She recited her shopping list. She wished she had said hello to him in passing. Just once. She waited. It was her duty. She wanted to see.

They rolled him out a half hour later, wrapped in white plastic, his bulk strapped to the gurney. His stomach pushed up between the straps, a snow covered mountain in the middle of the desert.

"...almost gave me a hernia," the red-cheeked EMT snorted; the gurney wheel got stuck on a pebble. Eve resisted the urge to poke at the plastic, to rip it open, to search for the zipper hidden in Buzz's flesh that kept Buzz in the fat suit he wore. She wished she could crawl inside and rescue the sleeping soul stuck inside. They rolled past her, a slow procession, and heaved him into the ambulance.

“Sorry you had to see that, lady,” the EMT said, a fresh cigarette wagging between his lips. They pulled away from the curb. She waved goodbye until they turned the corner.

She considered saying a prayer, but she didn't know which one to say, or if anyone out there would listen. She wandered to the side of the house, pushed a large garden rock under the window. She stood on her tippy toes and looked inside.

The afternoon light poured past her. It cast a distorting shadow on the kitchen floor. She leaned left, then right, searching for something. Some sign, some answer. She thought she saw a spot of blood.

Her husband cut his meat with the edge of his fork. He hunched over his plate. He rarely used a napkin and then only at the end of a meal. She watched him eat as she sipped wine from a mug, her paper napkin twisted into a ball in the palm of her hand.

“The neighbor died,” she said.

“Who?”

“The neighbor. Across the street. Buzz Rice.”

“The fat guy?”

Why does he do this, she wondered. He knew who Buzz was. She sighed. “Yes. The fat guy.” She didn't understand men. She never did — the way they walked, the way they talked, the things they did, the things they wanted, the things they said, the things they didn't say. All she knew is that she woke up one morning with a husband and two teenage sons and everything she held dear was banished to the high shelves of the closet to make room for hockey sticks and soccer balls and game stations.

“People die every day,” he said.

“The timing,” she said, “is unique. They said he'd been dead for a few days.”

With an imperious grin, he pushed his plate towards the middle of the table. “You know how many people die every day,” he said.

“Yes.”

“A lot.”

“One hundred and fifty-one thousand, give or take,” she said. “I looked it up.” She took his plate, stacked it on hers. “How many of those do you think go to heaven?”

He blew his nose on his napkin, wiped the corners of his mouth. "Heaven's a fairy tale to keep little girls like you in line."

"That's what you say," she said. She dropped the plates in the sink. She pulled her box of Chardonnay from the refrigerator. "Do you want a beer?" There was no answer. When she shut the refrigerator door, his chair was empty. He was gone.

She leaned against the cool granite of the countertop, a lone figure in a brushed steel kitchen, the renovation a gift for her fortieth birthday. A Shun knife set, a blue KitchenAid mixer, a pizza stone, a crook pot, zebra-striped dishwashing gloves, the miracle sponge, all gifts from her husband and sons. She swallowed her wine in one heaving gulp. Nestling the box of wine in her elbow, she wandered to the picture window.

Buzz's kitchen light was on. His television flickered. For a moment, she allowed herself to imagine that he'd come back to life, kicked out of heaven, a clerical error. Her heart swelled, rallied, then wrung itself dry.

She looked both ways before crossing the street, the box of wine cool beneath her arm. It was the end of the magic hour, when life is backlit by the sun and filtered by the moon. She remembered seeing his Lincoln Continental roll by many times at this hour, its maroon edges bleeding into the perpetual struggle of the grass, the ever encroaching Texas brown.

His house was a mirror image of hers, Yankee Blue instead of Colonial White. Where she had flowers, he had bushes. Her mimosas became his forsythia. Her belindas bloomed where he fought bafflegrass. She tilted her head back, opened the wine spigot with her teeth, and ran wine straight into her mouth and wiped with the corner of her shawl, another present from her husband from when she complained about the wrinkles age had drawn across her neck.

Around back, she poked at a cigarette butt with the toe of her shoe. The back door was locked from the inside, but damaged by the EMTs. One hard kick. The door gave. She leaned against the doorjamb, searching for a light switch with one hand as the other held the wine box up, the spigot at her lips. She pulled another swallow into her gaping mouth.

A seventy-two inch t.v., top of the line, the same one her husband planned to buy himself for his birthday, played in the corner. Reverend Harris was being interviewed. It was four days since the rapture that didn't happen and the media was still happily mocking him and his followers. The secret believers, the legions who donated fives, tens, and twenties as if they were purchasing lottery tickets,

fares better. They were able to laugh at themselves, shrug their shoulders, kiss their loved ones, and keep their jobs. Reverend Harris was apologizing for his numerical miscalculation. He swore that the real rapture had been postponed and would occur in November. She switched the t.v. off.

The carpets were the same as hers, Rocky Beige. The bathroom fixtures, the cubbyhole closet beneath the stairs, the hard maple railings all came with the subdivision.

There was a leather sectional that swallowed the living room and a recliner in the den. A coffee table, a few stained magazines. A model car, a set of golf clubs in one corner. Upstairs, one bedroom was an office, the other, a catch-all. In the master bedroom, the bed was unmade. His pillows smelled of sweat, salt, and soap. In his nightstand drawer, she found a flashlight, a condom, and a passport with one stamp. Puerto Rico. She tossed the condom back, tucked the flashlight between her belt and belly and lay back on the bed, his passport spread open on her chest like a novel.

At the time of his death Buzz weighed three hundred pounds. Eve clocked in at 102. Over ten years of mornings, she speed walked past him with barely a nod. There were things she resented. She had a long thread of resentments spooled around the skinny part of her heart. She resented that he lived alone in a house built for four. She resented his growing girth. She resented that he inherited his daddy's business while her husband, who she also resented, banged his head on the low ceiling of middle management so many times that he had a bald spot.

She resented that everything her husband bought her was navy blue. She resented that Buzz was spared the pain of child rearing. She resented that he was free to do whatever he liked. She resented that he never did anything.

She resented that every time she saw him, she looked away. She resented that he did the same.

And in that moment, she resented that she was here and he was gone.

His dresser drawers were stacked with folded golf shirts and khaki pants. His keys lay in a lump in a teacup saucer on top. There were no secrets hidden in the corners. His closets were equally boring.

His garage, lit by the single beam of the flashlight, was stacked with boxes. She counted seven cases of Girl Scout cookies, three cases of scented Yankee candles, three boxes of Boy Scout popcorn, a menorah, six crosses, all of different

styles and material, a dozen or more war veteran poppies, and a carton of pristine Little League outfits with the car lot logo stitched on back. There were cases of defunct VHS tapes, of vinyl records, three old televisions, two old computers, a work bench in the corner with tools that had yet to be unwrapped.

“Dead is dead,” she mumbled.

In the kitchen, she shut the microwave, turned the central air from frigid to cool. She examined his uneaten dinner, now covered in a fine white fuzz. She considered running the dishwasher, which was full, bowls, mostly, but she decided against it. She tilted the last of her wine into her mouth, chucked the box into his recycling bin, shut off the kitchen lights and stumbled out the back door.

Outside, the grass was short, dried out, shades of brown sprinkled with green. The sky had turned dark. The stars were out.

She lay on her back and pretended to be dead, too.

When she heard her husband’s car coast up the street, she jogged into her house through the front door. She positioned herself on the sofa with her arm draped over her eyes, her head tilted back in a pose of forbearance. He trudged in from the garage.

“Where were you,” she said. “It’s almost eleven.”

“Poker,” he said. “I told you I was going.” With a fake kiss and a hard squeeze, he walked down the hall to the bedroom and shut the door.

When she sat up, a blade of dried grass fell from her hair onto her lap. She rolled it between her fingers. Beneath its brittleness was a silky strength.

She drew a bath as hot as she could stand and bit her lip at the pain of sliding in.

When a person dies, they leave behind a mystery. Buzz left two. First, there was the issue of his impeccable timing which caused Eve to question whether a rapture would suck up whole bodies, or simply take the soul and leave the body behind. The larger question was personal. Now that there was a gaping hole between his house and hers, she regretted not pursuing it. He had always been there, plodding down his front steps to his car and she figured he always would be. Clearly, she was wrong.

It had to do with Frank Little who she grew up with, who took her to the junior prom, who died when she was cheerleading at an away game. Since

his death, traveling had become a burden for her, and maybe Buzz, too. She'd only been away from Texas three times, once to Disney when the boys were still cute, once to Club Med Ixtapa on her honeymoon, and once to Nashville for a sorority sister's wedding. Each time, she struggled with a nagging fear that when she returned home, everything would be different.

Buzz had been in the car with him. Neither boy had been drinking. Frank was driving. They swerved off the side of the road and into a tree. The steering wheel crushed Frank's chest. Buzz was concussed, but he walked away. He became taciturn, though he never talked much before. There were rumors of brain damage, but that was hard to tell.

She and Frank had kissed in that same car a week before. She only meant to peck his brow. He looked so sad, but a second kiss crept up, so gentle and soft that it surprised them both. She felt the sting of promise move from his lips to hers. It caused her to pull back and gasp, him, too, and then she ran into her parents' house without looking back.

In an early television interview, a reporter asked Reverend Harris what he thought heaven was like. Harris responded that he didn't know, having never been. But he had an idea. Eve hoped that heaven was a beautiful backwards slide into the Garden of Eden, where her Adam, who looked like Frank, was waiting for her. She swore she'd never eat from the apple tree of knowledge, or if she did she'd be careful not to share with anyone but the snake. She would choose kind over strong, considerate over sweet. She would choose the majesty of dinosaurs, the grace of prehistoric flowers as big as her head. She would choose silence and secret kisses.

She watched a movie once where the dead narrator saw the world through her best friend's eyes. Every morning, when she passed his house on her three mile loop, he ambled to his car, growing bigger each year. It was as if he wore the growing weight of responsibility. Every morning, she shook her memories aside. But all those years she looked at Buzz and saw a piece of Frank. She wondered if fragments of Frank's shattered soul weren't lodged between his ribs, along with his lost wishes, his dreams, his last words. She wondered if the burden weighed on him.

She crawled into bed next to her husband.

"Do you love me?" she asked.

He grunted.

"Do you want to do it?"

“Too tired.”

“Me, too,” she said. She rolled onto her side and listened to him breathe.

She resented that Buzz had been hiding in plain sight. She resented that somewhere within him, he cradled the last living memory of her first attempt at love. In the days leading up to the rapture, before it didn't happen, that spool of resentment grew so taut that her chest hurt. When the EMTs wheeled him away, somewhere deep inside that spool, the thread was snipped.

She drove past the car lot on the way to the funeral. Waves of cars sped up and down Route 10, rumbling, peaking and receding. The sun bounced from car window to fender to black asphalt and back. That side of town was tinged with brown. Brown grass, brown highway, mud-caked wheels kicking up brown dirt, brown workers riding in the back of a brown silver Silverado.

The digital clock was blank, but the sky-guy danced on.

At church, the casket was open, a double wide Cadillac convertible. Buzz's mother sobbed in the front row. His brother held her hand. Local business owners, used car buyers for whom he had cut a deal, the strippers and bartenders from the Wild Zebra, where he had lunch most days, the florist, the dentist, the elementary school teachers, the softball coach filled the pews.

Eve sat in a middle row, flanked by the ladies of the PTA and Libby Dower, president of the town beautification committee. Behind her, the church secretary and janitor. In the front rows, Susan Anderson, Betty Freeman, Lloyd Arbor, and the knitting club and their husbands.

Libby clutched her uncreased bible to her breasts. “I bought a car from him once,” she moaned. “He was a special, special man.”

“He was my neighbor.”

“Oh,” Libby said. She scooped in a little closer. “Did you know him well?”

“We were quite close,” she said. “I saw him every day.”

More filed in. The pews filled. Eve saw her husband duck into a back row and wondered if he, too, had been a secret believer, if he purchased a ticket to the lottery that would catapult a few lucky winners to the beautiful beyond. He slid next to a woman with hollow cheeks and smoky eyes. He took her hand. Eve blushed. Finally, she thought, a mystery solved. She turned back towards the pulpit.

The anticipation grew. The crowd searched for signals, signs that told them they were right. She felt it inside, a tingling in her fingertips, heat on her neck, the dizziness of the crowd, her heart on fire with knowing. A ray of light, the shuffle of feet, a cough from the podium. The audience leaned forward in their seats, wondering if they missed the bus that drove Buzz out of town. Praying that the bus would be back around.

She imagined Frank in the pew next to her, a grown man, his dark hair slicked back, his cowlick subdued, his hands calloused from working outside on the weekends. She felt him brush her cheek, watched him saunter to the coffin, hug his dead friend and climb inside.

To this day, Eve couldn't tell you what made her run up the aisle when the pallbearers closed in. Tears streaming down her face, blinded by her running mascara, she tripped on the leg of a pew. "Don't you close up that casket," she yelled as she went down. "Frank's still in there."

Libby Carmichael escorted her out of the church. Eve's husband turned his head away as they passed.

She drove down Main Street, the stores were still closed, the entire town following the hearse to the graveyard. She turned onto her street and into her garage and sat for a good long while. She didn't want to go in.

Buzz's car was parked in his driveway, as always. She cupped her hands against the window to look inside. There was a travel mug in the cup holder, a forty ounce Big Gulp on the passenger seat. The car mats were clean.

She kicked in his back door once more. Her ears rang. Her blood banged against her skull. She lifted his car keys from the top of his dresser drawers. In his bathroom, she found a new toothbrush and a half a tube of toothpaste. She took a bar of soap, three golf shirts, a pillow, and a towel.

Driving Buzz's Lincoln, her foot barely reached the gas pedal. She obeyed the speed limit. She stopped at the bank and closed out an account, filled her purse with tens and twenties. She drank a coke on the shore of the Colorado River and text messaged her husband. "Gone food shopping with May. Will be back later. Don't wait up." She chucked her phone into the water.

She drove with the windows open. The hills became distant. The spool around her heart unraveled. Eventually, the thread broke free. It drifted to the side of the road and tangled itself around the wildflowers. It perished in the unrelenting sun.

Late in the afternoon, she stopped at a diner. She sat at the counter and picked the apple out of a piece of pie. Next to her was a Mexican man with a ponytail. He was working on the *New York Times* crossword puzzle with a ball point pen.

"It seems like this is the sort of place where times stands still," she said.

"It is," the man said, "but, a few of us keep trying to push it along."

"Good luck," she said. She weighed down a five dollar bill with her water glass.

At first, she figured since the rapture didn't come to her, she would find the rapture. But somewhere on Route 10, she felt the heady freedom of dissolving dreams.

She had a full tank of gas and more time than she knew what to do with. She'd always wanted to see where the New Mexico cave dwellers lived. She'd heard good things about Las Vegas. California seemed like a foreign country. She sat on the hood of Buzz's car and watched the traffic and stars from the diner parking lot.

At dawn, she tucked her thoughts away, turned the key in the ignition, pushed the Continental up to ninety, and cruised the Interstate. Five a.m., heading out of Texas, hers was the only car on the road