Rachel at Home

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Rachel hadn't planned on driving to her old high school, but when she pulled into the lot across the street—the one close enough to watch but not be seen—she wasn't exactly surprised by where she was. Maybe all the time she'd been finding her way back there.

She thought about her own students back in Warm, now probably lazy in their summer vacation or busy helping their fathers make hay or pick tomatoes. She thought about herself and the girl she once was, pink backpack high on her shoulders.

The building looked mostly the same. She hadn't been by there in nearly twenty years. Not even when she'd come home from college for holidays and summers had she driven by the old school. It was out of the way, not near anyplace she'd ever needed to be.

Now it was summer, and there were only a few cars in the faculty parking lot, probably belonging to those who got roped into teaching summer school. Rachel's friend Hazel back in Warm was doing summer programs for their elementary school—reading activities and math games to try to stop the brain drain that happened when little kids were away from the classrooms and in front of the TV and video games for three months. Hazel said that most of the kids who came were from the poorest families and that was good because that meant the kids would still, at least, get two meals a day at the school.

Rachel thought now that there probably were kids who went to her high school who hadn't had a guaranteed dinner at home,

but that had never crossed her mind when she was a teenager. She lived in a solidly upper-middle-class neighborhood, and she and everyone she'd known were solidly upper-middle-class or wealthier. Most everyone she'd known had had a swimming pool, though her family had not. She remembered with embarrassment the screaming matches she'd had with her father, telling him that he was humiliating her because she didn't have as much as her friends.

Rachel's face grew hot as she thought about her student, little Lily Macrobie, who sat in the front row of her class and smelled like cat pee every day and who got two little bags of food on Friday afternoons to take home so that she'd be sure to have something to eat over the weekends.

Chris had told her to quit saying she felt sorry for those kids and to not dare treat them any different. "People do what they can," he'd said. "Or some maybe don't, but it ain't your place to try to make up for their parents. People around here don't want pity, Rachel. Pity don't help no one."

Thinking of her husband made her heart squeeze. She tried to picture what he might be doing right then, back home in Warm. He was probably at work, jabbing buttons on the keyboard, a job he hated. He'd much rather be out at the lumberyard or the sawmill, but since his father had died, someone'd had to take over the office. She knew he missed her, because he was good and decent and everything she was doing now—every single thing—was selfish and unfair, but she'd had to do it anyway. She had to get out of Warm—if even just for a little while—and coming home to her parents for the summer seemed the only way.

If she lived here, in the clean little Pittsburgh suburb, she would make more money. West Virginia teachers were some of the lowest paid in the country, and she knew that her parents had been quietly asking around about job openings, but she hadn't told them to. She'd always planned to go back, back to Chris, back to work, back to the white farmhouse that had terrified her at first but then became her home. Isn't that what she still planned?

She wanted Chris, she wanted to take their baby home and to go back to the way everything had been before, but then she thought of Andy Crystal, the blue-eyed high school student who had come into her house and who she'd nearly shot, accidentally, with Chris's rifle when she was giantly pregnant and on bed rest. "I could have killed him," she told herself, over and over. She hadn't told anyone it was Andy. When Chris had come home and found her, a bleeding mess from where the rifle butt had kicked back against her mouth, she'd told him she didn't know the boy and that he ran away before she could really get a good look at him.

The real problem wasn't that day, but all the days before. The days that she and Andy had watched each other at the school, him skipping class and hanging out in the parking lot or across the road in the dirty little park and her out at recess with the little kids. The day of the strange little earthquake when she'd sneaked outside for a terrible cigarette, and he'd been there, offering a light.

The real problem was the days after that she laid in her bed, hoping that her baby would be okay but thinking of Andy and how he'd come into her house, knowing she was there, alone upstairs. Thinking of his dark hair and eyes like ice chips. Thinking about his dead father and how some of the teachers at school had told her that Andy had taken care of him as he died from cancer, then how he and his little brother Solomon emptied everything out of their trailer, made a big pile in the middle of their dirt road, and set it all on fire. People called the fire department when they saw the smoke rising up out of the holler, but when the truck got there, Andy's grandfather hadn't let them put the fire out. Rachel pictured the old man standing just at the end of the blaze with some sort of big gun and an ugly expression, daring the volunteer fire fighters to make one move to stop what his grandsons had started.

The real problem, still, was that she thought of Andy Crystal every day.