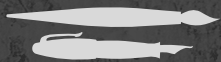


THE GOLDFISH BOY

Lisa Thompson



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For Mum and Lynne

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CHAPTER ONE

THE ARRIVAL

Mr. Charles had sunburn right on the top of his head.

I saw it while he was inspecting his roses. He studied each flower, giving the larger ones a little shake to see if any petals fell off as he edged along the pathway. The big, bald patch on his head was now a bright red, shiny circle surrounded by white, fluffy hair. He should have been wearing a hat in this heat, but I guess it's hard to notice if the top of your head is burning when you're busy doing things.

I noticed though.

I noticed a lot of things from the window.

It's not like I was doing anything wrong. I was just watching my neighbors to pass the time, that's all; it's not like I was being nosey. And I didn't think the neighbors minded. Occasionally Jake Bishop from number five would shout things up at me—things like *weirdo*, *freak*, or *nutter*. It had been a long time since he'd actually called me *Matthew*—but then, he was an idiot, so I didn't really care what he said.

I lived on a quiet, dead-end street in a town full of people who said how great it was that they didn't live in that big, smelly city of London—and who then spent most of their mornings desperately trying to get there.

There were seven houses in our little cul-de-sac. Six of them looked the same, with square bay windows, front doors with frosted glass panels, and whitewashed walls. But the seventh house, stuck between number three and number five, was very different. Built from blood-red bricks, the Rectory looked like a guest at a Halloween party where no one else had bothered to dress up. Its front door was black, with two triangular windows at the top that were covered from the inside with some old cardboard. Whether it had been put there to stop the drafts or to stop anyone from peering in, who knew?

Dad told me a developer had tried to flatten the Rectory twenty years before when our houses were being built, but it dug its hundred-year-old foundations in and somehow managed to stay, like a rotten, old tooth. The vicar's widow, Old Nina, still lived there, but I rarely saw her. There was a lamp in the front room window that she left on day and night: a glowing orange ball behind the gray curtains. Mum said she kept a low profile because she was frightened that someone from the church was going to make her move out, since with her husband dead, it wasn't really her house anymore. On her front step she had three pots of flowers that she watered every morning at ten o'clock.

I watched her and the other neighbors from the spare room at the front of the house. It wasn't quite as perfect as my bedroom, but I liked it in there. The lemon walls were still shiny-clean and it had that freshly decorated feel, even though it had been five years since it had happened. Mum and Dad called this room the office

since we kept the computer in there, but we all really knew it as the nursery. Hanging in a corner there was a baby's crib mobile made of six padded, stripy elephants, which dangled pointlessly over a tower of unopened boxes and shopping bags. Mum had put the mobile up as soon as she'd gotten home from her shopping marathon, even though Dad had said it was unlucky.

"Don't be silly, Brian. We need to make sure it works, don't we?"

She had wound the little key at the top and we'd all watched as the elephants twirled around and around to "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." When the music had stopped I'd clapped—I was only seven then, and you do silly stuff like that when you're that age. Mum said she'd unpack the rest of the shopping another time, but she never did. The bags are still where she left them: diapers, bottles, a sterilizer, a monitor, tiny vests. Everything my baby brother would have needed if I hadn't . . . Well, if he were alive.

The office had a window that looked out onto the street, and I saw my neighbors begin their day:

9:30 a.m.—Mr. Charles is deadheading his roses again. He's using some new clippers with red handles. The top of his head looks sore with sunburn.

Mr. Charles could have been anything from sixty-five to ninety-five years old. He never seemed to get older. I figured he'd found an age he quite liked and just stopped right there.