

# INVASION

A Short Story

By

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Emboldened by whiffs of pine, Judy Kaylor was inspired to walk to the grocery this morning. It was the first day of fall, not the calendar date, but a weather announcement. Small, sharp chuffs of wind cleared the Carolina sky, and spikes of brilliance slashed between live oaks and loblollies. Ground shadows quivered under her soft-skinned chukka boots as she placed her feet, one before the other, on the needle-strewn path to town. Her mission was organic lettuce, local goat cheese, and an inexpensive bottle of sauvignon blanc.

A private person, Judy lived alone and as unlisted as possible. She unsubscribed from unsolicited newsletters, asked to be placed on do-not-call lists, and did not donate to charities that sent unrequested address labels. As a young woman, she had shied away from shop clerks persistent with offers of help. She crisscrossed mall hallways to dodge insistent opinion surveyors who pushed clipboards into strangers' faces. She was one of the first to own an answering machine and filtered every one of her phone calls. She let the device shield her even when the ring might signal a call from a beau.

Such a call as that would have been a rarity. Judy passed through her twenties, thirties, forties, and fifties without a single heartbreak. She found fulfillment as a research librarian, preferring the whiff of mildewed pages of seldom-used tomes to that of male breath with traces of mint overlaying cigarette smoke, or worse, whiskey.

Judy's wardrobe, also, had escaped trends; and people glanced at her with interest as she crossed the market parking lot, the silky skirt of her paisley granny dress swirling around the twigs of her legs. Today she wore a cardigan of Mr. Rogers' vintage in deference to the drop in temperature. Her hair was a short page boy, still dark but with shimmering filaments of gray. She

was unaware of what drew most attention to her, the very item that she employed to stay invisible: Ray Ban wraparound Wayfarers.

Inside the grocery, she removed the glasses. Her eyesight had been wavering as of late, but she thought that, like most ailments she encountered, it would fix itself if ignored long enough. She had submitted to readers, and now she pulled them out of her fringed purse along with her checkbook. Having the bank and the pharmacy both encased in the market was a boon to her solitary lifestyle, and she gave a silent thank you, first to the Virgin Mary and second to Buddha, for the convenience. Judy had long ago given up regular church attendance in favor of TV worship services and living-room yoga. She didn't want anyone, under the guise of praying, to look at the back of her head and try to imagine what she did to get her straight hair so spikey or her clothes so wrinkled. At home, alone, she could more fully concentrate on the spiritual. Plus, drink coffee.

One person only was in line in front of her. He wore a t-shirt that announced "Wong's One-Hour Cleaning Service." He didn't look like a Wong, she thought, as she studied his profile with a side glance. Maybe a half-Wong. He had rich dark hair, lots of it, and he was smiling at the teller in an overly friendly way. The teller was young and pretty and smiled also, but in a professional "welcome-to-the-bank" manner.

Wong gave her a large envelope. "Hi," he said to the teller.

"Hello, how are you?" she said.

"I'm great. Wonderful. It's Friday."

She smiled, counting the money.

"Your dress is almost finished. Should be ready this afternoon."

The teller gave him a blank look. She lost her professional smile.

Wong was still grinning. “You know, the blue silk you dropped off to be cleaned. What was that stain? Martini? Champagne?”

Now she was giving him a “what-the-hell” look.

Judy clutched her checkbook to her heart. She was as affronted as the teller. She had never thought that cleaners imagined the history of stains and, worse yet, fantasized about the perpetrators.

The teller pushed the receipt through the window to Wong. She did not say thank you. He took the paper and said cheerfully, “Thanks. See you soon.” And he left.

Judy stepped up to the window. The young, beautiful teller had not yet regained her composure and her professional fake-smile face. But Judy understood and did not chirp a “hello-how-are-you” inanity at her. Instead, she silently pushed forward her check.

Once, quite a few years ago, Judy had encountered the same kind of unwelcome surprise into her private life. She had been young, too, and beautiful although unmindful of her attractiveness. She was dining alone, at a small corner table in an unassuming Mexican restaurant, and oblivious to all those about her, lost in an English literature text assigned by her grad school prof. At that time of her life, she had yet to embrace health food and instead was eating a plate of nachos and drinking a Dos Equis. Later she would wonder if those trendy foods had made her seem approachable.

And she was approached. A group of three guys who had been eating at the counter broke her concentration as they clattered from their bar stools on their way out. The noise caused her to look up and that was enough for one of them to detach himself from the group and alter his exit to stop at her table.

“Hey,” he said. “You got a package from your father today.”

She did not reply but tried to process this information. First, why would her father, who never called her and never wrote her letters and didn't even talk to her much when she did live in her parents' house, send her a package? And second, why would this person know she had received a package?

She must have looked startled because he laughed and explained. "I'm your mailman. I left it behind the planter by your door."

What? He's the mailman? Who knew? She had no words for him.

He laughed again and joined his buddies who were waiting for him at the door. They were also laughing. Maybe at him. Was this a thwarted attempt at flirtation? The bells on the door clanged and then they were gone.

Judy pushed away the nachos and drained her mug of beer. This was disturbing. How much did the postman know about her? Perhaps quite a bit. He knew when she was home and when she wasn't. He knew at which department store she shopped and what kinds of credit cards she owned. He knew from their solicitations where she went to college and what her political affiliation was. He knew, from their return addresses, the names of her friends and relatives. He knew, from a flurry of Hallmark envelopes, the date of her birth.

She picked up her book and began reading again. It was a compilation of letters written by Jonathan Swift to the love of his life, Stella, missives meant only for the eyes of his paramour. Jonathan could never have imagined that a graduate student named Judy would be reading them, too.

Later that afternoon, Judy found the package hiding by her door as the mailman had said. Her father's last name appeared in the return address corner, but, as usual, penned in her mother's cursive.

It was only a day or two after this that Judy went down to the post office. She thought about asking to speak to the supervisor but instead purchased a post office box. From there, at the office supply store, she bought a paper shredder.

Back home, Judy closed the drapes of every window despite the perfect weather. In her bedroom, in a dangerous balancing act with a rocking chair as a stepstool, Judy pulled down a shoe box labeled "Thom McCan Size 7 1/2" from the closet's top shelf.

In the living room the shredder was plugged in and waiting. Its jaws obediently gnawed each letter, postmarked from Philadelphia in years past. When the receptacle was full, she dumped it into her trash along with her memories of past relationships. Nobody needed to know. Even when she was dead.

Now today, decades later, the grocery store behind her, her cloth sack of provisions in hand and an unease in her chest, Judy retraced her steps through the pine woods to her condo. She identified the encounter between the cleaner and the teller as the source of her upset.

What Judy did not recognize was the impending global eruption of social media--a volcanic explosion that would be accompanied by the toxic gas of corruption and the noxious fumes of scandal. Citizens would willingly divulge their deepest secrets into the ether of the internet. Politicians and teachers and accountants and mothers and fraternity brothers would broadcast news of their successes and evidence of their vices to the entire planet. Google Earth would capture her pot-holed street with her dilapidated Kia parked askew in its assigned space.

Judy would pull her cloak of privacy as tightly around her as she would know how. She would place a sticky note over her computer's camera to avoid the clandestine Orwellian features of Skype and Facetime. Her landline phone would continue to rest in its cradle, voicemail intact;

her cell phone would continue to flip open, its capabilities limited to “sent” and “received” calls. Her TV would not upgrade to Smart and never ever stream.

All this was yet to come. Despite the chilly morning, by early this evening, the late September summer had regained its energy and pulled the temperature up to comfortable proportions. Judy enjoyed a dinner of spaghetti squash, sprinkled with the cheese she had bought, and a simple side salad of lettuce and heirloom tomato slices. She poured a second glass of the wine to savor as she finished the dishes. After, with one more splash into her glass, she turned out the kitchen light and moved onto the balcony.

The sun gave its last hurrah, the tree frogs came out and called in the dusk, and Judy put her feet up onto the metal coffee table. The wine convinced her that she was content. Safe. All is well with the world.

The stars emerged just as they did every night and she searched for Orion, the one constellation she knew. He was a huntsman, and he could protect her. She looked up without worry, aware only of the beauty of the night.

And three satellites looked down and recorded her.