

LOCK AND KEY

Stephanie Ressel

First Place—Essay Competition

Growing up in what they liked to call the “wrong side of town,” I didn’t see much wrong with it. The park was within walking distance—that’s if you count walking through the ditches and climbing through chain link fences a feasible route. The neighborhood was safe. There were plenty of generous policemen giving my neighbors rides, I could only imagine, back home. The mean ol’ pit bulls were always chained up to a pipe to keep kids like me safe.

Mom had two full-time jobs and Dad’s job was simply to be the smartest man alive. I guessed our house must have been the most expensive estate on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Mom left for work every day at what felt like completely random hours. “Do not answer the door,” she would say to me and my siblings as she locked the deadbolt from the inside of the house. I never understood what she meant by this, given the door could not be unlocked from the inside without a key, and even then, the secondary door was also protected through several locks. Mom would say, “You never know if that person wants to take you away.” I loved where I lived. Never did I want someone to take me away. Never did I answer the door.

When I was in first grade, we moved across the bay to what they liked to call the “nice side of town,” though I didn’t see what was so nice about it. The streets constantly twisted and turned and cul de sac-d, and with every turn there were fifteen more houses identical to my own. The trees were too tiny, far too weak to climb, surrounded in red mulch chips, and barely supported by strings and splints. There was no park. More importantly, too many people knocked on the door asking to mow our lawn and prune our hedges, or for us to change our satellite provider and buy cookies. Sometimes when someone knocked on the door, my parents would be home to answer. Standing behind my dad’s legs and hoping to God that

these people weren’t here to take me away, I would listen. I would hear how they spoke and try to imagine what they looked like, never letting them see me as to not remind them that I am the one they came here to take away. Our new door could be unlocked from inside the house, so I began to answer the door when my parents were not home, just to see what these people looked like. They weren’t all that bad. All it took was a simple “No thank you, mister” and they went away.

One morning I woke up to a loud banging on the door—a solid, dense mass beating on the door as if to say, “Let me in!” I lay awake to decipher whether the banging noise was just my imagination until three more

blows hit the door. *Bang, bang, bang!* I sprang up and answered the door. Two men towered over me, so close to the door their black boots covered almost every letter in “welcome” and made the floor mat read “...el...e” instead. The men wore black blazers and opaque sunglasses.

Where were their eyes? Was there even someone in there? Being an expert on handling visitors at the door, I said, “No thank you, misters.”

“Is Marilyn here?” they interrogated.

The fear of who was behind the door began to slowly fill me with regret as I went to wake Mom up. Tired, she just stared at me. When Mom answered the door, I hid behind her legs and listened. They were not asking to mow our lawn or prune our hedges. Instead, they were demanding my mother’s documentation and threatening to “send her back to her own country.” The men in suits told my mom that she didn’t belong here. I guess we should have stayed in our old neighborhood. The men in suits put my mom in handcuffs and let her have a seat on our porch. They then proceeded to rape our home, inspecting every room, digging through every closet, bathroom, cabinet, and even our garage. The men blunderingly searched through my brother’s

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and sister's rooms, unconcerned of the risk of waking them. They looked under the beds and in every pile of clothes. It was as if we took something of theirs and they desperately needed it back. Whatever they were hunting for, they never found because as soon as they got through the third or fourth sweep of snooping, they met my mother outside.

I knew this was my fault. These people were taking my mom away and it was all my fault. All I could do was try to go back to sleep and hope this wasn't real. My bed felt foreign. My entire house felt like I had never lived a day in it. After what felt like hours, my mom came back inside, walked into her room, and shut the door. Those men left, and the days that followed were like those of the days before the knock. Dad was still the smartest man alive. Mom still went to work at random hours, and although I still wasn't able to see her often, I was glad to know that she was still coming home.

It was only a matter of time until I'd discover that those men were ICE agents. That day was the closest I'd come to being orphaned by the hands of a white man unhappy with an Asian woman. I learned that some people didn't like people like my mom living in their country. Regardless of the countless of jobs my mom had worked and years waited to even be eligible to become a citizen to this land of opportunity, all it took was an angry white man to convince these officers that she did not belong here. Must have been a white man's country. Must have been why my first home was on the "wrong side of town." It must have been why the people living on the "nice side of town" believed they were entitled to a better community. I thought back to my old neighborhood and the wondrous paradise I knew it as. Many new questions arose like "Why didn't the kids that got rides from the policemen ever come home?" or "Why was the mean ol' pit bull so mean?" or "Why did our door have so many locks?" Part of me knew the answers to these questions. Another part of me was afraid to admit them, but for now, the door will remain unanswered. △



Refugee's Prayer

Shelby Tisdale

Graphite pencil



Reminiscence

Amanda Zhou

Third Place—Drawing
Charcoal