**Missing Persons**

Phebe Jewell

Lighting up on my front porch is the only peace I get these days. Now that Darla’s gone, I could smoke in the house, but she trained me well. We had a good run—almost ten years—but I can’t say I blame her. Who wants an old fart who spends his days on a front porch sofa?

Best of luck to you, girl, wherever you are. Leaning over the rail, I flick ash on the hostas. Here’s to a woman who only sees the good in people. Hope I didn’t break her spirit too much.

 “Someone your age should know better,” an unfamiliar voice calls from the sidewalk. Turning to face the street, I see a Somali girl in a black hijab clutching a clipboard. Orange Chucks peek out from long robes.

 I take up the challenge. “Better than what?”

 “Than dropping potentially flammable ashes in a garden,” her voice dismisses me. “It’s wildfire season, you know.”

 “Don’t worry, sister.” I lean forward with what I hope is a friendly smile. “I’m careful.” Settling back against the sofa, I take a last hit from the joint and close my eyes. When I open them, the girl is still there. “Sorry, I already bought some Girl Scout cookies earlier this year.” Mint for Darla, lemon for me.

 The girl laughs. “It’s been a long time since I was a Girl Scout. I’m here for the Census.” She holds up an official-looking badge dangling from a lanyard.

 The Census? Darla took care of it weeks before she took off. I drop the roach in an empty beer bottle. “We already sent it in.” No sense telling her Darla left. Probably have to fill out the damn thing again. I can tell this girl’s a stickler for detail.

 “No, it’s not you. It’s your neighbor.” She points to a faded rambler across the way that might have been yellow twenty years ago.

 “What about him?”

 “So, somebody lives there?” She studies the chain link fence as if her stare alone could unlock the gate.

 “Why don’t you ask him yourself.” I move my makeshift ashtray to the side.

 “I’ve tried. This is the third time I’ve stopped by.” She offers me her first smile. “I was hoping you could help me,” her pen at the ready.

 I shift my butt cheek on the sofa. The one neighbor I don’t know. There’s the Alvarados next door, the Shikumas behind them, the Nguyens on the corner, Anthony and Robert in the red house. But this guy?

 “Can’t help you. Don’t know anything about him.”

 “But you’ve at least seen someone?” Her eyes steady my gaze. God help me, I like this girl’s persistence.

 “Yeah, sometimes he barbecues out back in the summer. Cuts his lawn every now and then.”

 “This household is the last one on my list. I’m supposed to fill something in.” Her voice warms with a mischievous invitation for invention.

 “Why not? I’ll play. What do you want to know?”

 Her smile widens. “Name? Age?”

 “Let’s say Rodrigo.” I haven’t had this much fun since Darla left.

 “Hispanic?”

 I pause, consider the man I’ve only seen at dusk on summer nights. “Filipino. Late fifties.”

She looks up at me.

 “57.” The age I met Darla.

 “Who else lives there? A wife? Children?” She giggles. “A husband?”

 “An uncle. Let’s call him Angelo. In his 70s. And there’s a wife. Sofia. Also in her fifties.” I imagine them all in the kitchen, standing around the stove, beer bottles in hand, laughing at some family joke.

 “Anybody else?” This girl is thorough.

 Time for another smoke. “Nope. That’s it.”

“You’ve been very helpful.” She quickly skims the form, nods, and caps her pen. “Thanks again.”

 “Sure thing.”

 Striding to a silver Kia parked in front of Anthony and Robert’s, the girl turns and waves goodbye. I nod, and consider the drawn shades, the chain link fence across the street.

 “See you around,” I call, but she’s already driving away.