



The Gardens of Eight Mile

by Emily Watters

The ground vibrated against my back with each passing car. The thump of hip-hop lingered in the dirty air. I was tucked in under the shade of our mulberry tree and eating a casual handful of its so-so fruit. This was my first taste of mulberries since I was a kid, back when mulberries were weeds and had to grow in secret in the corners of suburbia. The tree above me stretched to the edges of the yard, and its branches sagged from the weight of the fruit. Closing my eyes, I imagined I was the first to lie here so lazy, feeling free as a country girl in my little yard just two blocks north of the city limits of Detroit.

My mother thought this was stupid. “You are not in the country,” she said. “People die where you live.” She cried when my husband and I bought a house here in Hazel Park. She told me she was afraid to get off the highway when she saw our exit: Eight Mile, the infamous border of the city, a road that seemed chiseled into the soil like a blockade, something to protect the knee-trembling middle class from the possibility of Detroit.

The general guidelines for the metro Detroit area, enforced (and perhaps designed) by parents and real estate agents, were:

- 1) North was the safe side of Eight Mile.
- 2) Personal safety increased in direct proportion to distance north of Eight Mile.

To soothe my mother, I emphasized rule number one and insisted that rule number two was out of date.

At the end of our second month in our new neighborhood, I awoke in the middle of the night to the sound of a woman screaming. I peered out the window into the darkness. A man was kicking a woman as she lay on the ground, her knees pulled to her chest. I ran for the phone on my tiptoes and called 911, but I was too late; my husband saw the man run away, and the woman stumbled in the same direction. We went back to bed and lay down facing each other, unable to sleep, unwilling to talk, only waiting for the next sound.

In the morning I went outside to the street, still in my pajamas. My neighbors were gardening in their front yard, planting in a wooden wheelbarrow set at an angle in the center of their garden. I passed them and found only a small bloodstain on the pavement. I squatted next to it and ran my finger around its edges. The neighbors ignored me. There would be no mention of it, though we all had heard.

Later that week, I tried to lie under my tree, but I jerked upright at the sound of feet on grass.

"What're you doing?" asked a little girl, standing over me with one hand on her hip. Her scrawny face blocked what little sunlight crept through the branches. She tugged up her jeans and I noticed her chipped toenails. Her book bag dropped to the ground beside her, and she grinned a toothy smile, the sort of teeth only a kid could get away with.

She said, "It's Emily, right? We know your *boyfriend*." Right after we moved in, the neighborhood kids had followed my husband, Erik, around, begging him for chores. Apparently, they had it in their heads that we were rich. "My Uncle Rick has a crush on you," she said. "He likes your walk. He says you see a walk like that and you know the girl's got money. Anyway, my name's Britney. Can I come in?"

"Sure," I said. Had she been an adult, this would have been unthinkable, but she was only a little girl. I worried she had come to tell me some horrible secret that would give me no choice but to protect her. I stood up and grabbed my blanket, shaking it as if the berry stains would fall right off with a flick of the wrist, then walked inside with Britney following close behind. Our home was one of the few remaining duplexes in the neighborhood. From the outside, it was a big, beautiful, white block of a house sitting among its rotted-over one-story neighbors. The inside, however, was a let-down. A person walking in immediately felt cramped. There were just too many walls. Though there were only four rooms total, every room was sectioned off, giving the house a maze-like feel. "Sorry about the furniture," I said, closing the door.

The girl eyed the couch, the only piece of furniture in the room, and frowned. "I thought you were supposed to be a doctor or something."

"No, I'm a medical student. It's a little like a doctor, but I don't get paid."

She looked at me like I just said I studied shit for a living.

"Who told you that, anyway?" I asked.

She shrugged. "I dunno."

We sat on the couch facing each other, each of us sitting with crossed legs and hands folded on top. I was reminded of play tea parties I had as a kid. All we needed were a couple of stiff, feathered hats, the kind I used to dig up from my grandmother's basement.

"So, I'm having trouble with math," she said. "I thought you could help me out."

"Math," I said, relieved. "You came over here for math?"

She fixed her eyes on me and played with a wrinkle in her jeans.

"What grade are you in?" I asked.

"Fourth."

I thought back to that age. At nine, it was a rare day that I had spontaneous words with an adult. "OK," I said. "Maybe I can help." I got up and led Britney to the study, a room with all four walls covered in whiteboard. The room was my husband's project; he's an engineer and always wants a spot to brainstorm. The girl walked over to the computer and ran her fingers over the keyboard. "Awesome," she whispered.

"Tell me what you're working on in school," I said.

She dropped her hand from the keyboard and pulled out her homework.

I looked it over and smiled. "I've got some shortcuts for this stuff."

A secret: I loved good old elementary school math. I itched to calculate the tip after dinner or a thirty percent discount at a shoe sale. To relax in traffic, I took the numbers in a license plate and used basic operations to get a number that was divisible by five. My mother used to call me her little calculator. My brothers called me autistic. My husband hoped to advance me up a few notches, maybe to a scientific calculator.

There was no transition time for us, not really. We started working through her homework, and it was as if we'd always had this relationship that involved writing math equations on walls together.

"OK. I should go, it's dark outside," she said, as we made it to the edge of wall number two. "Want to meet my mom? She'll want to know who you are."

"Sure, I'd love to," I said, which was only a half-lie.

We walked across the street to meet her folks. As we entered through the back door, a man restrained an angry dog. Dogs like these, indigenous to the area and notorious for pacing behind chain-link fences, were not for cuddling; they were raised to protect. We entered the family room, which was dim with smoke that burned my eyes. There were two couches, both packed with people and sagging in the middle. The man on one end smiled at me, and the woman next to him nudged him hard. I forced a smile and turned from the group to follow Britney into the next room.

"This is my mom," Britney said, and started helping her mom fold laundry. I stood in the doorway with my arms tucked tight across my chest. Britney's mother looked up at me, letting oily strands of hair hang in front of her face. "Thanks for letting me spend time with your daughter," I said. She smiled, the way a person can get caught smiling for

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a driver's license—only with the mouth, like the eyes and lips aren't connected, but just share a common space. Feeling the silence of the room, so many eyes on my back, I slid out of the house, whispering nice-to-meet-you as I went.

"You fit right in over there?" my husband asked over dinner.

"I don't know. Maybe."

He smirked.

I smirked back. "Or not. Fine. Anyway, can you believe she asked me to help all on her own?"

"Yeah, pretty savvy. So, when will you have time to do this?"

"I don't know. It'll be an hour here and there. It'll be good for me. Maybe even relaxing."

At that point, I was finishing my first year of medical school. Erik had spent that last year fighting for my time. One night not long before, he'd stood over me while I was studying and said darkly, "It's like you have nothing else. This is all you need." He eyed my notes like he could spit on them. Shortly afterward, I left him for a week and stayed with my parents, but his words cracked me out of a yearlong spell of studying sixteen hours a day, and I remembered him again. I promised him I would cut back on studying for the next year, like some pathetic school-junkie. So, while part of him was obviously glad to see me take an interest in something that wasn't a book, another part no doubt resented the prospect of losing more of me to some kid.

The girl returned two days later, this time to work on reading. I brought her to a bookshelf in the study and let her pick out a book. "I'm sorry I don't have any kids' books," I said. "I should. Well, I used to, back when I tutored."

The girl's eyes scanned past the rows of textbooks and old novels until she fixed on a narrow area of magazines. She pulled out *For Him Magazine* and said she recognized it from home. I sighed, but didn't argue. We sat on the couch close to each other. I thumbed through the magazine. "Here, how about this one: 'How to really treat a woman,'" I said, in a sing-songy voice like a kindergarten teacher. She giggled. I rolled my eyes at myself and motioned to the article. "Go ahead," I said, and shifted uncomfortably over its likely content. But the content didn't matter, because she didn't make it past the first word. The girl couldn't read.

Seeing her hunched so small next to me, peering down at the unreadable words, I felt an ache inside. I suggested we return to the office and review the rules. She shrugged and followed me. She mixed up her vowel sounds; she couldn't put more than two letters together. She was already nine. She

needed daily help. I pictured her at home, sitting on the dirty carpet and trying to spell things out over the drone of the TV. I envisioned a family member telling her to move, she was in the way. I saw her feeling flustered and giving in to the sound, so much louder than her own thoughts. Not one in the bunch seeing her as she was, a hungry little girl.

"Let's meet tomorrow," I said.

"Sure, but can I come over here? My mom doesn't want you over."

"Why's that?"

"I told you, my Uncle Rick likes you."

I paused for explanation but decided that explanation might make it worse. "Sure," I said, "let's meet here. Let's always meet here."

After that, she came by every day. The office became our classroom. The girl insisted we start at the top of the board even though it was clearly out of her reach. She'd stand on a chair, reaching with a marker for the top left corner, her shirt pulling up and her thong sticking out of her jeans. I gasped the first time that happened. It was like catching a glimpse of a baby stroller parked next to a prostitute. Eventually you learn to look away, or the stroller becomes a normal part of the scenery, or something more jarring comes along and you forget about it.

Over the hum of the window unit, we spent the rest of the summer working on irregular vowel sounds and putting strings of letters together. During my break between first and second year, "str" became "struh" instead of "su-tu-ruh." "Ou" became "ow" instead of "oh" or "oooh-uh." When I returned to school, she waited for my car to pull in the driveway each evening and was at our door, out of breath, within minutes. I tried my best to keep it to an hour and ignored her irritation when I told her I had work to do.

In time, she brought over spelling words once a week, though this often turned into a fight. Thinking I sounded calm, like smoke seeping through a grate, I would tell her the best part of reading is that if you memorize the rules, you don't have to memorize individual words. The girl, with no effort to leash up any anger, would ask what the difference was.

"It's less work," I'd say.

"Well, it seems like a lot more work."

Our compromises were solemn, each bargaining toward an end for which we felt certain. In the end, we would make some agreement like working on the rules for the first half, spelling for the second. But spelling would be ten minutes longer.

Erik, meanwhile, scowled when she ate his chocolate, when she left her belongings strewn across the living room, and when she used his camera to take self-portraits. He gave only a touch of a smile when she left him messages on the whiteboard: Emily + Erik. Britney + Erik. Once he came home to find "Erik + Ms. Landing (Britney's teacher)" written in blue letters, enclosed with a pink heart. I waited for him to read it, and then I shook my head at him and said, "Erik, how could you?" Britney looked up at him with wide eyes and burst into giggles.

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