

The Bitter Scent of Marigolds

By J. Jill Robinson

The marigold house as Abby called it, was a small dirty-white stucco bungalow with a white picket fence and a wire gate, sitting in the centre of a half-lot. What set it apart from the others on the block was that instead of the small patch of lawn and prairie garden normally found at the front of Saskatchewan houses, this yard was completely filled, except for an ageing and narrow cement walkway up the centre, with 55 gallon metal drums painted bright blue. The drums had been made into giant planter pots and filled with large yellow and orange marigolds, and a long black garden hose snaked up from the tap and wrapped around a swivelling homemade watering arm attached to the side of the house.

Abby had never seen anyone out in the yard, which she found odd given the number of times she'd driven by. The marigold house fascinated her. And then one hot June evening when she pulled over to answer her cell phone, she was astonished to see an elderly woman out in the yard deadheading marigolds with a large pair of garden shears. Abby's heart leapt. Gotta go, she said abruptly, and clambered out of her car, her eyes fixed on the woman as though she might vanish. She approached the gate, which was hanging askew on failing hinges. The woman looked up. She was wearing a faded cotton housedress and apron, and she herself was faded, too, in her knee-highs and bare knees. Black Crocs on her feet.

I love all your marigolds. So cheerful, Abby said with a smile.

The woman ambled over to the fence the way a cow might, holding the lethal-looking shears in one hand and stuffing the large heads of spent marigolds into the bulging front pouch of her apron with the other. Then she held out her free hand take it or leave it, and when Abby took it, her hand was dry with soil.

Maureen Creighton, the woman said, her smoker's voice soft, low, and gravelly.

Abby said, I've driven by so often and admired your flowers, but I've never seen you. I'm really curious, though. Whatever gave you the idea?

Maureen eyed Abby somewhat quizzically as she put the shears down on the fence rail and took out a pack of cigarettes. Number Seven.

Idea for what?

For the marigolds. In the drums.

Maureen held the pack out to Abby with the flip top opened and she shook her head. Maureen shrugged, lit a cigarette with an old flip-top lighter. The smell of lighter fluid mixed with the tobacco smoke. Maureen inhaled deeply and started to cough.

Once she caught her breath, Maureen said that when she retired she hadn't known what to do with herself. She'd never caught the travel bug, and she wasn't much into shopping, but she knew she had to do something or she'd go crazy and be dead within a year. Like my husband, she said, clearing the phlegm in her throat. Rudy worked at the Sears furniture outlet all those years and when he retired he'd nothing to fill his thoughts except bad memories. A year later he was gone. Dropped down dead.

I'm sorry, Abby said. That must be tough.

Maureen shrugged, as if it barely mattered. She ground her cigarette out on the railing, dropped the butt into her apron pocket, and brushed the debris onto the ground.

Long time ago now. Me, I worked at Zeller's up in the mall, she said. Before that, I worked at the pharmacy. Before that, the Co-op, first on the gas pumps, then in groceries. Zeller's was the best. Then I retired. You can only watch so much TV, so I came up with this.

She lit another cigarette and as she exhaled the first lungful of smoke she waved the cigarette out over the marigolds and started coughing again.

When it ended Mandy offered, I'm not a gardener. But I love flowers.

Maureen took another drag. Me too neither. I was never much of anything, actually. But what the hell. Marigolds don't need much.

They smell so bitter.

I like how they smell, Maureen said. And they keep the bugs away. She heaved a raspy sigh and shook her head as she chortled and wheezed, and Abby wondered if perhaps she was a little bit, you know, unhinged. Like her gate. Maureen wiped her forehead with her forearm.

Thirsty work, this, she said. Glass of water?

While she waited Abby moved around to the front of the house and peeked in through the dusty white sheers hanging in the dirty front room window. The curtains were pulled back into scallops and tied, like the curtains kids draw. Insect bodies filled the inside sill. Daddy long legs. Flies. Directly in front of her, on the other side of the picture window, a large plastic flower arrangement, perhaps from a wedding, sat on a plastic doily on the cabinet of an old treadle sewing machine. The colour of the flowers was for the most part leached away; only the palest memory remained of what must have been the original bright colours. Abby cupped her hands against the dirty glass and moved her face closer.

Now she could see a brown and gold chair and couch, a burgundy and grey afghan throw folded neatly at one end. Two-tiered Arborite end tables. In front of the couch a matching coffee table with a *TV Guide* and a large cut glass ashtray full of cigarette butts on it. Above, a Safeway print of a river.

See anything you like? Maureen said behind her. Startled and sheepish, Abby turned.

I—

Here you go, Maureen said, and Abby took the glass.

Driving home Abby decided to pop by and pitch a story about Maureen and her marigolds to Louisa, the editor of the neighbourhood weekly newspaper, who lived next door.

She began telling Louisa about the house, and the flowers, and Maureen Creighton, and was surprised at how Louisa nodded knowingly.

Oh, Abby said, crestfallen. You already know.

No no, Louisa said. But don't you know about Maureen Creighton?

Know? A little. Not much.

But you know her husband was that murderer?

Murderer?!

Back in the 50s her husband—Richard? Roman?—killed some old guy up in Cooper Hill.

Rudy, Her husband's name was Rudy. And he killed somebody? Why?

You know, the interesting thing is that they never found out. It was a nasty piece of business, though. Violent. I read about it in the paper. I don't remember the details now but what I do remember is that they never completely figured it out. The motive, I mean.

Wow, Abby said. That's way more interesting than marigolds.

The marigolds will suit just fine. Get a picture.

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Abby felt lighter as she pulled open the door to the Daily Times on Monday morning. She was a woman with a purpose. She was going to find out about the murder, and then

she was going to solve the mystery of the motive. Inside the newspaper office, a pink young woman with hair so blonde it was almost white set her up with the microfiche and she scrolled through the old papers, scanning headlines for early June 1951, 52, 53. Nothing. And then, on Monday June 7th, 1954, Eureka! The headline read "MURDER ON COOPER HILL." Abby asked the pink young woman for a physical copy of the paper and she obligingly returned from the storage stacks a few minutes later with the decades old, yellowing newspaper. Abby sat down at a large round table and read the first reports of the murder.

The victim was Herman Verlinden, 80 years old. He had lived with his daughter Jeanette, 42, in a house he'd built himself on Cooper Hill. Mr. Verlinden, a widower, was murdered while his daughter was out for the evening. A suspect, Richard Rudolph Creighton, 25, had been arrested a few blocks from the scene. There was a grainy picture of Rudolph Creighton and one of Herman Verlinden, and Abby looked long and hard from one to the other as though they might reveal something essential, but of course they didn't.

She drank down the last of her now-tepid coffee, got up and took the newspaper over to the desk to order photocopies, waited for them, and left, ruminating as she wandered home, taking the longer route along the river.

In her office she swept the grocery flyers and magazines off her desk and onto the floor in a grand and dramatic gesture. She placed the manila envelope of photocopies in the centre of the cleared surface and slipped them out. The desk wasn't quite large enough to accommodate them all, so she dug around in the closet for the card table. She sharpened her pencils and placed them beside a little stack of multi-coloured sticky-notes. She cut out the newspaper columns and the pictures of the two men and tacked them up on the bulletin board above her desk, overtop postcards from her sister. Again she peered at the pictures. Maureen's man, Rudolph, aka Rudy, and Herman. Both men narrow in the face, both with an abundance of hair. They might have been mistaken for father and son. But no, the paper stated that murderer and victim were strangers.

Abby sat down and tapped a newly sharpened pencil while she swung her chair gently from side to side and carefully reread the articles. Eventually she put her pencil between her teeth like a bit, and stopped swinging. Why on earth had Rudolph Creighton entered the house of a complete stranger and attacked him so viciously? And, how could she find out more? She couldn't very well march up to Maureen and ask her point blank. And then an idea dawned on her.

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At the courthouse a large, soft man in grey flannel pants and a wrinkled white shirt damp under the armpits and no tie glanced up at her from behind his desk. When she asked him if she could see court records from the Rudolph Creighton murder trial in 1954, he looked dubious. The case was fifty years old, he said. The court transcripts were likely no longer available.

Not available? she asked.

As in destroyed.

Disappointed, she turned to go, but then she turned back. She asked him as nicely as she could if he would mind please just taking a very quick peek. He sighed heavily and hoisted himself up from his desk and disappeared through a swinging door. After about twenty minutes he returned carrying a thick file. He shook his head as he placed the file on the counter, mopped his forehead, and caught his breath. He rested one plump, sweaty hand on the folder as he puffed, Should have all gone. Lucky for you. They didn't. He pushed the fat file towards her.

Yes, she thought, and thanked him profusely. She took the records and sat down on one of the orange plastic waiting room chairs. She put the folder on the chair next to her, undid the clasp, and opened it. There must have been an entire ream of paper jammed into that folder. So much information! How on earth was she going to read and absorb it all? She went back to the counter. The clerk frowned and did not rise from his desk. Could she possibly take the records home, she asked, if she took tremendously good care of them? No, he said, she could not. Nor, he added, could they be photocopied.

She returned to her seat. She'd have to skim everything as quickly as she could and write down what was most important. She reached into her bag and found her pen, but no notebook. Shoot. All she had was a hotel pad of paper. What an idiot. She covered both sides of every page and the cardboard too and still she ran out of room and had no choice but to ask the man for a few sheets of paper, which he dispensed reluctantly. Then, as closing time approached, he nodded at the clock on the wall and left to lock up downstairs. She looked at the door. She grabbed the file and its contents, got the hell out of the building as fast as she could, and ran all the way home.

Panting heavily, ablaze with exhilaration and fear, she slammed the front door and locked it. She rushed to her office and closed that door behind her, too. She clutched the file folder to her chest while she caught her breath and then dumped it on her desk. The clasp gave, and unruly sheaves of paper spilled out, some slipped to the floor. But she was safe, she told herself, and giggled with relief. No one would find her, and no one would care. No one would call the police. The records were supposed to have been destroyed and they hadn't been, and they wouldn't be missed unless Mr. Fatty made a fuss and why would he do that when they had been stolen from right under his nose and he would be blamed? Her heart slowed. She sat down. Put all the pages of the official transcript in order, and made a neat pile. Discarded the haphazard and largely illegible notes she'd made at the courthouse. Went out to the kitchen and made a cup of tea. She would begin again at the beginning just reading. She rifled through the pages so she could start with the testimony of Maureen Creighton nee Black.

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Abby tried to imagine a much younger Maureen standing before the court with her eyes fixed on the floor. Maybe she spoke softly; maybe it was hard to hear her, maybe she was asked to speak up. Who knew? Maureen Black told the court that she'd first met Rudolph Creighton when he came into the Co-op to gas up his work truck: he'd just started driving for McKee Cartage & Hauling. They chatted a bit and before he left he asked her out. They dated for about a year, she said. Rudy had proposed at Christmas, and though she wasn't sure it was a good idea, she figured there would be plenty of time to think it through and change her mind if need be. She didn't know him all that well yet. But it was fun to be engaged.

Maureen testified that the last time she saw Rudy, until that day in court, was in his room, on Saturday June 5th at about one p.m. She was late for their appointment, and he wasn't too happy about that and he wasn't happy that her brother Lionel had come with her, either. But she'd asked her brother to come because she'd just broken off with Rudy and she was afraid he might be angry at her even though he'd seemed okay at the time. No, she told the court, she had never seen him angry before. It was just a feeling.

When she went into his room and saw the bottle of rye, she was surprised, she said, because he wasn't much of a drinker. She asked him why he was drinking, and he said he'd given up on her so he'd gone to the vendor's to find some other company and he was already starting to like its a lot better than hers. He was kind of snarky, yes, sir, but under the circumstances she understood. Rudy didn't say much else. Just finished one drink and poured another, and kept looking at her. As though, thought Abby, he was trying to say something with his eyes instead of his mouth. Like maybe how mad he was that she'd called off their engagement. She and Lionel, said Maureen in closing, didn't stay long.

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A fellow named Stan Manteau had lived in the room next to Rudy's in the boarding house, and he testified that when he came home from work at the hardware store on Saturday June 5th at about 5:15 he went upstairs to his room as he always did. It had been a long day, and he was tired. As he was opening his door, he heard someone crying in Rudy Creighton's room. Manteau was surprised—he didn't normally hear a sound from Creighton, only smelled his "damned cigarettes." Manteau paused to listen. At first he thought there were two people in there—it sounded like some kind of conversation between a man and a woman. Some muttering, some crying out, some more muttering. Only it wasn't two people; it was just Creighton, "Crying like a woman." Disgusted, Manteau decided that whatever was going on in there was none of his business, and anyway he was hungry, so he went into his own room to start his supper. He'd brought home a pork chop from the butcher's, but first off he had to do his dishes from the morning, and when he turned off the water in the sink the sounds from Rudy's room had stopped.

At around six-thirty, Manteau was standing at the window gnawing on the chop bone and waiting for the kettle to boil for his tea, and he heard Creighton leave his room, go down the stairs, and out of the house. He watched him zigzag down the street, waving his arms

up and down "like he was some kind of goddam bird." Without even the decency, Manteau said, to tuck in his shirt.

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Shortly after midnight, Rudy Creighton was arrested in the backyard of 555 Uphill Avenue, five blocks from the site of the murder. That night, the homeowner, Charles Morgan, had locked the doors and kissed his three sleeping children. He had climbed into bed beside his wife, set his alarm clock, and was about to turn off the light when he heard banging at the front door. Not like someone knocking, he said, more like someone trying to kick the door in.

Stay put, he told his wife. He got out of bed, put his dressing gown and slippers back on, and made his way quietly down the hall to the front door. He peered into the dark through the window and saw a man standing on the porch, his head bent and his hair hanging down in front of his face. The man didn't look up. He kept on kicking, alternating feet almost rhythmically. Morgan couldn't see him clearly, but his first impression was that the man's right hand was damaged—it was bloody, and looked swollen, and Morgan figured that was why he hadn't knocked. And then Morgan turned on the porch light. The man looked up. Morgan saw a desperate yet oddly vacant look in the man's eyes before he raised his hands to shield them from the light. His face was scratched up and bloody. Morgan's first thought was that the fellow had fought with his girlfriend and she'd run her nails down his cheeks. Morgan was wary of opening the door, and called out to him, Are you all right? But the man didn't answer. He lowered his head, and resumed his kicking. Thump, thump, thump.

Morgan went over to the phone and called the police, and then he went back to the door and looked out the window again. Creighton stopped kicking, looked up and yelled, You called the cops, didn't you? and then he started moaning, How could you? over and over again. As though Morgan had betrayed him, had broken his heart. Then there was a pause, during which Creighton's voice suddenly changed, and became menacing. You better watch yourself, buddy, he said.

Morgan could hear his wife down the hall talking to their now-wailing children. He stepped back from the front door. He waited. Everything outside had gone silent. Then he heard movement, and when he peeked out the window again he saw Rudy stagger down the front steps and disappear around the side of the house. Now Morgan went to the back door. He saw Rudy's outline appear in the darkness; Rudy was on all fours now in the backyard, by the clothesline, and when Morgan opened the door a crack and called to him again, Are you all right? Rudy Creighton said with a kind of deflated belligerence, You want a fight? You got it. Then Creighton clambered to his feet and hung onto the clothesline post. I'll fight you, he said into the night. Then he fell headlong onto the lawn and lay still. Inside, Morgan heard a car door slam, and saw the beams of the headlights and the flashing cherry on top.

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At 11:30 p.m. on Saturday, June 5th, Officer Robert Landon and his partner Officer Gerry Cable donned their rain gear and responded to a call from a homeowner on Uphill Avenue. When they arrived, the homeowner, Charles Morgan, led them to a severely intoxicated male lying face down in the backyard. He wasn't moving, and when Officer Landon crouched down beside him, he could smell the liquor. It was pretty dark, and raining lightly, but the back porch light was on at the house and cast a bit of light. Landon rolled the man over. Hey, buddy, he said. The man's eyes were open, but his eyeballs were rolled right back so all Landon saw was the whites of his eyes. It was like the man was passed out except that he wasn't, said Landon.

Hey buddy. What's your name? Landon asked him.

The "inebriated individual" made a slight movement and said, his voice slurring, Who the hell wants to know?

We do, pal.

Who the hell are you?

The police. And we're taking you in.

Like hell you are.

Together the officers pulled Rudy to his feet. The first cuff went on easy, Landon said, but the second was harder because Rudy kept yanking his arm away. Once both cuffs were on he dared them to take them off again so he could show them "what kind of lousy cops" they were. They wrestled him to the front of the house and into the squad car, en route picking up a windbreaker that was lying on the walk, and a loose button. It was pouring rain by then.

Rudy kept sliding down onto the floor in the back of the police car like a bad kid acting up, but finally he ended up on the seat with his legs in the air kicking the roof of the police car with both feet. Officer Cable climbed in the back and sat on him to hold his legs down and that's when Rudy...took a shit. The officers drove to the station with all the windows rolled down and the rain pelting in.

At the station they dragged their sopping wet prisoner inside and got a proper look at him. They saw that his face was scratched up pretty badly and his hands were covered in blood. But whose? His wet shirt was ripped open and missing buttons, but he didn't appear seriously injured anywhere, and so they figured that the blood must be someone else's. The question was whose, and where that person was, and how badly he or she might be hurt. But never mind that for now: who was this person? They wrestled him into a cell and left him.

In the front pouch of the windbreaker they found a package of cigarette papers, a lighter, and a pouch of Sweet Caporal tobacco smeared with blood. But no ID. Who was this guy?

Their prisoner started making one hell of a racket, banging the tin basin meant for him to piss in against the bars and the floor. Cable yelled down the hall at him to shut up but he kept at it. When they went down there they were surprised to find him naked; his wet clothes—his shirt, his pants, and his combination underwear—were thrown in a corner. His body was "liberally smeared with excrement," and he stunk to high heaven. They took him down for a shower and gave him clean clothes.

Do you have my comb? the much-subdued prisoner asked, shivering. Do you have my smokes?

What's your name?

Rudolph Creighton.

And then the telephone rang. There'd been a murder.

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On the night of June 5th, Jeanette Verlinden was going across the street to babysit. It was raining, so she took her galoshes and umbrella. She went out to her father's workshop to let him know she was going, but he was running the table saw and when she opened the door he didn't look up. She hated the sound of the saw, so she left without saying goodbye.

When she got home just before midnight she was exhausted, as the children had been difficult, and all she wanted was to get to bed. She noticed that her father's outdoor shoes had been knocked off the back steps, and she thought a cat or some other creature must have bumped them. The inside light was on, which surprised her: her father didn't like to leave any lights on except the porch light. She stepped into the porch and noticed a little blood smeared on the freezer, and she thought she'd been careless while thawing stewing beef earlier in the day and she chastised herself. There was mud on the floor, too, which also surprised her, because their floors were always gleaming: she had to wash and wax them every single day, because, she said, Daddy is very particular. She then corrected herself. Was. But that night she was so tired she couldn't think straight, so none of these things were registering.

There was a little more blood in the hall, though not a lot—a little on the hardwood floor and on the wall, and underneath the stair railing leading upstairs. She saw mud on the bottom stairs too and that's the moment her heart started to pound and she thought she knew what had happened. Daddy must have hurt himself! He must have cut himself in his shop and she hadn't been home to help him or to hear him call for her help! Frantic, she called up the stairs, Dad? Daddy! But he didn't answer so even though by then she was

very frightened she turned on the light but she could not make herself go up the stairs. Daddy? she said again. And then she made herself look. She could see her father's bare foot peeking out from the landing where the stairs turned, and his ankle, and the cuff on the leg of his blue and white pyjamas. Why wasn't Dad wearing his slippers? she asked herself, numbness spreading through her. Terrified now, shaking with fear, she went over to the telephone and called her brother Don. She could barely speak, she said, her throat was so tight and her mouth was so dry. But Don came right over, turned on all the lights, and went right up the stairs. When he came down his face was white and he told her their father was dead. He asked her what had happened. She said she didn't know. He looked at her and she looked at him and everything was quiet. How strange that was. When they were kids, she said, they used to think they could hear their father breathing even if he had gone to bed. Now, there was nothing.

Don told her they had to call the police and she nodded and he did and they came. One of the officers went upstairs and when he came back down he said to the other officer, Here's what we're looking for, Cable.

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Dr. Albert Sampson, the doctor who examined the body, concluded that Herman Verlinden had died at approximately eleven p.m. on Saturday, June 5th, 1954. He had been found on the steps crouched against the right side of the staircase, as though he had been trying to protect himself, which explained why most of his injuries were to his left side. In addition to "a goodly number" of surface injuries, particularly about the face and head, the bone under the victim's left eye had been crushed by a heavy blow or kick, and there was a large triangular-shaped, ragged edged gash behind the left ear. Skin and hair were found under his unusually long fingernails. Five ribs on the left side were fractured, and the left kidney was damaged severely. The kidney, Sampson told the court, is a deep-seated organ, yet Verlinden's had sustained a "transverse laceration," suggesting a particularly violent assault. There was extensive haemorrhaging, and the blood, said Dr. Sampson, was pooled in an exceptionally deep, large mass.

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My name is Richard Rudolph Creighton, the prisoner said, and I am twenty-five years old. I live at 133 Ashdown Street, where I room in a boarding house. I was working steady but I quit as of five p.m. on Friday June 4th and I received my last pay the same day. Ninety-two dollars cash. I was moving home to Zeitz to help my mother with the seeding. My father died in April and the hired man quit so my mother was on her own.

On Saturday June 5th I got up at about 9 a.m. and I cooked myself an all-in-one breakfast in my room. Ham, eggs, potatoes. I was expecting a visit from my girl, who actually wasn't my girl anymore because she'd broken up with me. Maureen Black. She was supposed to come at eleven but she didn't show up. I gave up on her and walked over to the liquor store on Twentieth Street. I bought a twenty-six of Corby's Rye Whiskey. \$4.05 plus twelve cents tax.

When I got back to my room I poured myself a drink and watched out my window. For some reason I was still waiting for Maureen. I had another drink. She showed up at around one with her brother Lionel, which didn't make me very happy. He's a waste of space. But there he was anyways and I couldn't very well ask him to leave. Maureen was wearing a nice blue dress, and she had a new white purse with matching white shoes, and I thought maybe she was dressed up for me, and wanted us to make up. But when I asked her, she didn't say nothing except that they came to say goodbye. I was supposed to be catching the bus to Zeitz.

Maureen didn't want a drink so I poured a short one for Lionel and another one for me. I moved my suitcase onto the floor and Lionel sat down on the end of my bed and Maureen stood with her back to me looking out the window, and I sat on a kitchen chair admiring her backside and eventually she turned around and took a kitchen chair across from me and we all sat there looking at each other and not saying much of anything that I can recall. It wasn't a very nice visit or a very long one and after they left I was pretty cut up about it when I realized I might never see her again.

It's hard to say how much I drank after she'd gone. I believe I finished the bottle around suppertime and then I went out. I don't know where I went from there but it wasn't the bus station, as I'd forgotten all about the bus by then.

Next thing I knew I woke up in the crowbar hotel, face down on the metal bed springs with a crappy grey blanket over me. My head was busting and I felt like hell. I smelled something terrible and realized that I'd had...an accident, and I took off all my clothes. Then I felt dizzy and sat down and looked at my hands. My hands were all over blood and I didn't know what happened to me.

I started to holler, and when the cops came they took me down to the shower. They threw clean clothes and a towel at me and I stood in the shower with my mouth open guzzling water from the showerhead I was that thirsty. I dried myself off and the clothes fit all right. Then the cops took me upstairs. I drank some more water, but what I was dying for was a smoke. I'd sure like a smoke if you've got one, I said, and the one police officer held out a package of rolling papers and a pouch of tobacco and said, Yours? and I said, Yes, and reached for them but then I saw they were smeared with what looked like blood and I changed that to Maybe. Then one of the cops must have felt sorry for me because he gave me one of his tailor-mades. He handed me my own lighter to light it with. My Ronson. That cigarette tasted damn good and I wanted another one right away but didn't get it. They had some questions to ask me first, they said.

The cops exchanged looks and then the one says, There's been a murder.

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Abby and Maureen were sitting side by side on the front steps of her house looking out over the sea of yellow and orange marigolds. They were thriving in their ocean of bright blue drums. Abby had been en route to Canadian Tire and there was Maureen out in her

yard watering her marigolds with the watering arm. She looked thinner, more hunched over, and frail.

It's nice to see you again, Abby said, pausing at the rickety gate. Your marigolds are looking great.

Thanks, said Maureen.

I don't know if you remember me, Abby began.

I do. Long time no see.

Abby stayed at the gate and babbled on about writing a story for the neighbourhood community newspaper about the marigolds, and she asked Maureen if she was okay with that.

I'll need to take some pictures, too, okay?

Maureen, lighting a smoke, nodded, and told her to come on in. Abby dragged the cockeyed wire gate shut behind her and attempted to latch it.

Just leave it, said Maureen. It's too broke to fix.

As they sat on the steps talking about the marigolds, Maureen Creighton made a little pile of butts beside her, grinding each cigarette out thoroughly on the concrete. Then there was a pause, and Abby said, Will you excuse me for a sec? I'll be right back. She went to her car and grabbed her camera from the glove box. She took pictures of Maureen sitting on the steps, and standing beside the blue barrels of bright orange marigolds.

Then Abby put down her camera and looked directly at Maureen.

Maureen? I want to come clean. I haven't been honest with you. I'm going to ask you right out and hope you're okay with it. About your husband. Rudy Creighton.

Maureen turned her head and looked directly at Abby then, eyes slightly narrowed, so much smoke obscuring her face that Abby couldn't quite read her expression.

And today is September the 10th? Maureen said coldly.

What does that mean?

The day Rudy was sentenced, in 1954?

Oh! Abby said. I didn't know!

'Oh, I didn't know!' You're full of shit, Maureen said.

I know, Abby said, wishing she could die.

After a long, tense pause, Abby said, I read the old newspapers. I read the court records.

Maureen looked at Abby in surprise.

No flies on you, she said, and reached for her smokes, but the package was empty.

What I don't know...what I'm dying to know...is *why*.

Maureen picked up the cigarette butts one by one and tossed them into the package. Then she shook it. It made a soft rattle.

I'm out of smokes, she said.

I'll run to the Shopper's, Abby offered.

When she got back Maureen was gone. Abby knocked on the front door, went around to the side door, and even rapped on the front window. Nothing. She wedged the pack of Number 7 and a sticky note with her phone number on it between the ripped screen and the bent ornamental curlicues on the aluminum door and she left knowing that Maureen would never call her in a million years. Why should she? And how could she, Abby, have been such a total idiot? This whole thing was a waste of fucking time. She'd blown it.

Abby slammed the door to her office and locked it. She yanked down the pictures of Richard Rudolph Creighton and Herman Verlinden from the bulletin board. She took the files and piles of court notes, narratives, fragments, guesses, and ideas she'd recorded on Sticky-notes and scraps of paper; she took everything to do with the Creighton/Verlinden murder case and made an unruly pile, sat down and began feeding every piece of paper into the shredder, starting with the court records. When the shredder jammed and quit because it was full she took the lid off and looked in at the narrow uniform strips of the court records curled and looped around in the plastic bin. Rudy, Maureen, Stan, Jeanette, Cable, and the rest. There they were. She was abandoning them all. A sense of failure began to spread through her.

And then instead of continuing the destruction, she stopped. She made neat piles of her remaining notes, her words, her Sticky-notes, and she placed the newspaper photographs of Rudy and Herman on top and she left the room and closed the door behind her, grabbed her purse and car keys.

*

The house at 555 Uphill Avenue where Rudy was arrested was a storey-and-a-half on a half-lot, and up for sale. The porch light was on though it was daytime, the walk wasn't swept, the unmowed lawn was brown and dry. Abby went up on the porch and stood still and quiet in front of the door, listening. For what?

She kicked the door, tentatively at first, but gaining momentum and rhythm. Thump, thump, thump. Alternating feet the way Rudy had. Did you kick this door like this, Rudy? she whispered. You did, didn't you?

She walked around the side of the house. The yard was like a meadow, and the clothesline was gone. Somewhere around here, she told herself. Or there. She got down on all fours, stood up again and brushed off her hands and knees and sighed.

Back on the porch she tried the front door, which was locked. She peered through the window Morgan had looked out of and Rudy had looked in. She could see the old wall phone. She touched the door with her fingertips as though she were trying to read Braille. The realtor might let her inside. But what was the point?

*

The Verlinden house was a green and white hip and gable with wide front steps. Everything about the place exuded still and calm. The even green lawn on either side of the walk was mowed and neatly edged. Peony bushes were tied up with dark green twine on either side of the front steps, their hot pink and white blooms starting to brown. No one answered the doorbell.

She went back to her car and decided to wait, hoping someone would eventually come home. As she waited, she tried to imagine what had happened on the night of June the 5th. Maureen's man Rudolph Creighton had approached this very house, but he had avoided the front door and headed for the back. Why? Maybe the front door was locked. Or maybe he didn't know what he wanted, he was so drunk. And what did he want, anyway? Abby had no idea. Mr. Verlinden, meanwhile, was up there in his bedroom on the second floor, getting ready for bed, putting on his blue and white striped pyjamas, lining his slippers up beside his bed, climbing in, laying his head on the pillow and closing his eyes. But then he heard something.

And then Abby heard something. A red and white Mini Cooper pulled up in front of the house and a blonde girl, a teenager in a turquoise t-shirt and cargo pants, hopped out of the driver's side, bounced up the walk and opened the front door, which wasn't locked. Abby got out of her car and crossed the street. She rang the doorbell, and the girl opened the door.

Yes? she asked. Abby introduced herself and told the girl point blank that she was obsessed with the murder that had occurred there in 1952.

Oh that, the girl said, with teenage uninterest.

Then Abby asked, almost grovelling, if she might possibly be able to see where the murder had happened.

Sure, the girl said with a yawn that perhaps said how could anything so far in the past even matter? Whatever. Come on in.

Thank you, thank you so much, Abby said. But one foot across the threshold she stopped.

Would it be all right if I came in through the back door? I'd like to come into the house the way he did, the way Rudolph Creighton, the murderer, did.

Sure, the girl said, and shrugged. I'll meet you round the back.

Abby walked down the side of the house and around to the back porch. The girl opened the door and Abby slipped off her sandals and lined them up on the steps as Verlinden had habitually done with his shoes. The girl didn't notice. She stood to one side texting as Abby stepped into the porch, empty now, where the chest freezer with the blood smear on it had stood. She walked past the girl and into the kitchen, which was redone. The cupboards were glass and maple, the appliances stainless steel, the floor ceramic tile. Nothing suggested any of the history Abby knew the room held. Yet she shivered slightly: Creighton had walked through this space before and after the murder.

She continued down the hall to the front door foyer. She saw that the light switches were still the old-fashioned button kind, and therefore Rudolph Creighton had pushed these very buttons with his fingers. Now Abby touched them too, and felt another shiver. Then she stood at the bottom of the stairs and imagined being Verlinden's daughter uneasily looking up towards the landing. And then, unlike Jeanette, she climbed up the stairs to the second floor landing and the bedrooms. Jeanette Verlinden's room was now a teenaged girl's room with a white four-poster bed and Avril Lavigne and Green Day posters on the wall. Abby crossed the landing and went to stand in the doorway of the master bedroom.

Mr. Verlinden's bed had stood right inside the door, though it had been replaced with a Swedish teak one. The feather pillow had contained the imprint of his head, and the bedclothes had been flung back as though he'd got up to discover what was going on. His bedroom slippers had been lined up side by side; he hadn't paused to put them on.

All that was gone now, of course.

Abby paused at the top of the stairs before she started back down. Right here on the landing was where their violent struggle had begun, where the old man had fought to keep his life and the younger man fought to take it.

She looked down the stairs. Mr. Verlinden had been on the second step below her when the police arrived, one leg tucked under him, the other extending to the half landing where the stairs turned. Abby stepped down onto the second step. She sat, and leaned up against the wall as Verlinden had done trying to protect himself. Closed her eyes. Mr. Verlinden had huddled right here as he died. Rudy in his drunken fury had viciously attacked him, punched him, then stood above him and kicked him, kicked his head, his

left side, kicked him in his ribs, his kidney. Creighton, wearing brown Oxford shoes, not the work boots she had first imagined.

The police said Mr. Verlinden's head was slumped forward, lolled against his chest, and his arms were hanging loosely. His head of wavy white hair was matted with blood, and blood was splashed two, three feet up the wall and spattered above, too, on the sloped ceiling. She shivered. Right here.

The teenaged girl was texting in the foyer as Abby descended and her eyes didn't move from the screen on her phone. At the bottom of the stairs Abby waited for a few seconds, and then said, Hello? The girl looked up then with a slight frown at the interruption and said, Oh. You done?

Abby said if she didn't mind her asking, did it bother her living in a house where a murder had occurred.

No, she said blankly. I'm cool with it.

And you've never felt anything weird?

No. Her voice was flat with a dismissive lack of interest combined with faint annoyance.

And that was it. Abby thanked her and followed her as she walked back down the hall and through the kitchen and the porch and left through the back door as Rudy, too, had done after inadvertently smearing the now-absent freezer with blood. His, or Verlinden's? Oh stop, Abby, she chastened herself. Does it matter whose? The girl closed the door behind her as Abby stepped down. What, she wondered as she returned to her car, had Rudy been thinking as he left? Had all that exertion sobered him up, even a bit? Could he think at all?

And, she thought, doing up her seatbelt, had the violence lingered in the air of the house for hours days weeks months even years? Did bad energy hang around the staircase, or float around the whole house in a moveable fog? Had it descended the stairs and followed Rudolph Creighton out the door and down the street, imprinting itself on the rest of his life? Were there traces of it left, even now? That a person more sensitive than Miss Texty might still detect? Or would that be all imagination? And who could tell?

*

Maureen's voice on Abby's answering machine was barely more than a whisper. When she could not decipher the words, Abby dropped the groceries on the kitchen counter and drove right over and pushed through the broken gate. The marigolds looked to be dying. Maureen answered the side door with a cigarette in her hand. She was wearing a grubby yellow quilted satin dressing gown with coffee stains down the front. Her hair and skin were both grey and loose. And when she spoke, it was as though she couldn't summon up

quite enough air to sound her words. How had she gone downhill so fast? How long had it been since Abby had seen her?

Not doing so good, Maureen said. She breathed in, and coughed such elongated and difficult coughs that Abby wondered if she was going to die right there in the doorway and what would she do if she did? Come in, Maureen said. Have to lie down. She led Abby into the living room, and she lay down on the chesterfield and pulled the grey and burgundy afghan around her as though she were cold, though the room was hot and muggy and all the windows were closed. The air was heavy with smoke. Abby sat down in the matching chair. Maureen sighed heavily, exhaling a long, final drag before leaning over and butting out her cigarette in the big cut glass ashtray. There was a deep sadness in her smoking. And resignation.

Here I am, Abby thought. Finally. She would never have thought it possible, but here she was in Maureen and Rudy Creighton's living room, sitting in a scratchy old chair in front of an ancient floor model TV with a dial and nobs. Maybe Rudy sat in this very chair watching TV, resting his arms right where hers were resting. Maybe he butted out his cigarettes in this same ashtray. Listen to you, she said to herself. In this hot, close room, breathing clouds of second-hand smoke, there was nowhere she'd rather be.

Thank you for your call, she said to Maureen. I'm so glad to be here.

What do you want to know? Maureen said hoarsely. She picked up her deck of smokes and put it down again.

Maureen, I want to know why Rudy killed Mr. Verlinden. I can't figure it out on my own. I've tried.

Herman Verlinden. Long while since I heard that name. Maureen sighed heavily, coughed, and reached almost reluctantly for her smokes. Deftly she flipped open the lid of the Ronson and flicked it into flame with one hand.

Could I—? Abby asked hesitantly.

You want one? Maureen said, surprised.

Abby shook her head. No, I just wonder if I could hold it, the lighter, she said, and held out her hand. Maureen placed the lighter in her palm, and it felt warm, and smooth and familiar even though it couldn't be, and she closed her fingers over it.

This was his lighter, wasn't it? she asked. Rudy's.

Maureen nodded. I'll have it back, she said.

Sorry, Abby said, and she laid it on the coffee table between them.

Rudy's parents, Maureen began breathily, were Big George and Eleanor Creighton. Eleanor was sixteen when they married, and he was twenty-three. They lived on the farm in Zeitz all their lives. Rudy was number eighteen of twenty-one children. Nine boys and twelve girls.

After we got engaged at Christmas, Rudy he drove me out to Zeitz one Sunday in January. The roads were terrible, but Rudy was a good driver. His parents had invited me for dinner, he said. I figured he meant just the four of us, but when we pulled into the farmyard there were all these vehicles. And the house was chock full of his relatives, all staring at me. Sizing me up, I suppose. I wanted to get the hell out of there. But first there was the dinner. They'd added on to the kitchen table by turning it sideways and putting sheets of plywood on saw horses, and then covering it all with plastic table cloths. His mother had a big pork roast in the oven. She brought out applesauce and put it on the table, and bowls of chopped carrots, and sliced beets, and mashed potatoes and turnips mixed with butter and parsley. She'd done it all herself. The gravy, the apple pie, the percolator coffee with fresh cream. No help from the daughters and daughters-in-law except with the dishes. It was her job, and she was proud of it. Me, I find Jell-O a challenge.

Maureen paused before adding, I used to love food. Now everything tastes like cardboard.

After dinner I thanked Mr. and Mrs. Creighton for the fine meal, and said that Rudy and I had to get back to the city. Right, Rudy? I said.

I guess, he said, but he looked like he could have settled in there like he never left. So I went around on my own and said goodbye to everyone. They kept telling me how glad they were to meet me, and how quickly I'd learn about farm life, and what a great guy Rudy was, wasn't he, and how much he liked me. Finally Rudy went out and started the car. We barely spoke on the drive back to town. All I thought about was how this was the road I was going to walk down if I didn't do something about it fast. I'd be no more than a cook and a baby machine, stuck out there on the farm. I was terrified. I wanted more from life.

Maureen held out her hands and looked at them, fingers splayed. Ragged nails. No polish. No rings. She took a sip of water.

And then around Easter Rudy's father died—he dropped dead in the barn. And then the hired man quit right before seeding, and Rudy started talking about moving back home to Zeitz to help his mother. He wanted me to come. So bad. I should've just said no right then, but I didn't. I felt sorry for him. And then next thing I know he ups and quits his job! And he says to me, 'We're going. Give your notice.' He thought he'd just pack me up like a folding chair and take me with him. I told him I couldn't, that I liked my job at the drugstore, but he wouldn't listen, and in the end I had to shout at him *NO! NO!* as loud and clear as I could so he would get the message. And we broke up.

Maureen stopped, shook her head, took another sip of water. She tried to heave a sigh, but the air caught in the phlegm in her throat and her chest rattled and wheezed and she coughed for a good five minutes before she could continue.

Rudy called and said he really wanted to see me one last time, and I agreed to go over to his place on the Saturday. Maybe he still thought I'd show up carrying a suitcase. And when I was late because of my brother, maybe Rudy thought I didn't even want to say goodbye and that my word was no good and so he went out and bought that bottle of rye. He wasn't much of a drinker at all, you know. When I showed up with Lionel, he wasn't happy about that either, because he didn't like Lionel, and then Lionel told him straight out, She ain't going nowhere with you, pal.

Rudy was standing over by the window, the coffee cup of whiskey in his hand, the bottle on the sill. I'll never forget the look on his face, the disappointment and anger. Men get angry when they're hurt. Or afraid. Or ashamed. His face went dark and he tilted his head back and drank the whiskey in his glass down in one gulp and grimaced before he reached for the bottle again. Don't call me your pal, he snarled at Lionel. Then he turned to me and said, Now both of you, get the hell out. And we did.

I didn't hear what happened after that until the next day. I figured Rudy was on his way to Zeitz, and I was feeling relieved that maybe now I could stop feeling bad about him and get on with my life. What a joke, eh?

How did you find out?

My brother Lionel.

Maureen's living room was almost silent, the only sound the rattle in Maureen's chest as she breathed, and a fly buzzing against the window glass. Abby could barely breathe, the room was so close and so hot, the smoke so dense, the truth so heavy. Everything completely still, silent as the grave.

I still don't understand, Abby said finally. Why did he kill him?

Maureen paused and caught her breath, lit another cigarette off the stub of the existing one before she resumed.

Why did he kill that particular person Mr. Verlinden, you mean?

Yes.

That's a good question, all right. I wondered about it myself, for the longest time, and I didn't figure it out until after the trial, when Lionel drove me past Mr. Verlinden's house. I hadn't seen the house, and I admit I was curious. And the minute I saw the house I knew. I knew what had happened. She paused. Met Abby's gaze with rheumy eyes and held it while Abby tried to stifle her impatience.

You're dying to know, aren't you? said Maureen. Well here you go. The house on Cooper Hill was almost identical to the one I lived in. Two storeys, white, big tree out front. Walkway round to the back. Rudy was so drunk he thought it was my house. I'm sure of it. I think he was looking for me—to kidnap me and take me to Zeitz? Try again to convince me? Kill me? And he was so drunk he got lost and ended up in a different part of town and went in the wrong house. And when he didn't find me he found that poor old man. She looked at Abby sadly, her eyes filling with tears. He couldn't have known it was the wrong house. I'd just moved there. He'd never been inside. And he was so drunk.

Did you ask him? Abby said. What did he say when you asked him?

I never asked him.

Never?

Let sleeping dogs lie, I thought. Because by then it didn't matter. I couldn't do nothing about the old fellow's being dead. All I could do something about was my part in it.

Your part?

Turning Rudy into a monster.

Maureen, he turned himself into a monster.

She waved her hand dismissively.

You didn't see him that day in court. He was himself again. Calm and quiet. The Rudy I had been so fond of. I felt so sad for him. He was so lost. Confused. He didn't know what had happened. He didn't know what he'd done. She was crying now, snuffling and keening, rocking back and forth. Abby went to sit beside her on the couch. Put her arm around her shoulder.

And here I am all these years later, Maureen said bitterly. All that past drug along behind me. She pointed at a spot on the carpet. Right there. Got up from his chair and fell right over.

*

For a week or two after the first killing frost in October the smitten marigolds remained in their bright blue barrels, dying. A week after that, they were gone, the dark earth surfaces of the barrels plain and disturbed, raked clean. Who, Abby wondered, had done that for her? She drove down the alley and saw the dead marigolds heaped in Maureen's composter. Pulled up by their roots and tossed. Their desiccating orange and yellow blossoms turned and turning brown. A month later snow covered the surfaces of the blue barrels. And then on a bleak dark January day Abby read Maureen's obituary in the newspaper, and wept for Maureen, who had once wanted more from life.

*

In the spring Abby drove over to Maureen's house and was surprised to see it all spruced up. The exterior had been power washed, and the bits of glass in the grey stucco sparkled in bright sunlight. The gate was fixed. The white trim on the windows and doors was freshly painted and gleaming. The watering arm was gone. All of the blue drums were gone, and fresh turf had been rolled over the bared earth to make it an ordinary yard again. She couldn't see anyone around, so Abby walked through the oiled gate and up to the front window. It was so clean! She put her hand up to the glass to block the glare, and peered in. The living room was much brighter. No insect bodies on the sill. New orange curtains. The plastic flower arrangement replaced by a large classic wedding photo. A young man who looked vaguely familiar in a tuxedo standing next to a young woman in a white gown and veil. Abby heard a wail from inside, a baby crying, and she scurried back down the walk and out through the gate, which swung nicely shut behind her with a satisfying click as it caught, latched, and held.

J. Jill Robinson

Jill Robinson lives in Banff, though she is currently the writer-in-residence at the Regina Public Library. Robinson has published 4 collections of stories, and one novel (*More In Anger*). Her work has also appeared in many literary journals.

J. Jill Robinson



Photo: Laura Vanags 2011

J. Jill Robinson, B.A., M.A. (Calgary), M.F.A. (Fairbanks). Born June 16, 1955 in Langley, B.C. Married to poet Steven Ross Smith; one son, born 1995, Emmett H Robinson Smith. Writer of fiction both short and long, and of creative non-fiction. 24th Writer-in-Residence, Saskatoon Public Library 2004-2005. Editor of *Grain magazine* 1995 – 1999. Teacher of English Literature and Creative Writing since 1985: University

of Calgary; University of Saskatchewan; St. Peter's College, Muenster; SUNTEP, First Nations University of Canada. Writer in Residence for Southern Alberta Libraries in 2010-11, and for the Canadian Authors' Association, Alberta Branch, 2011-12. Mentor for the Canada Council/ SWG for three years; Mentor for the Canada Council/AWG in 2012. In 2009 her work was published by *Event*, *Prairie Fire*, *subTerrain*, *The Antigonish Review*, and the *University of Windsor Review*. Now lives in Banff, Alberta. In 2011 her creative nonfiction work was published in *Geist*, and in the anthologies *Slice Me Some Truth*, and *Somebody's Child*.

Jill's first novel, *More In Anger*, was published by Thomas Allen in Spring 2012.

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Publications

Residual Desire. Coteau Books, 2003.

Eggplant Wife. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1995.

Lovely in Her Bones. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1993.

Saltwater Trees. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1991.

More In Anger. Thomas Allen, 2012

Awards

Two Saskatchewan Book Awards for *Residual Desire*, 2003.

Howard O Hagan Prize for Short Fiction collection, Alberta Writers Guild for *Lovely In Her Bones*, 1993.

Co-winner, *Event's* non-fiction contest for "Finding Linnette", 1991.

Winner *Prism International* Fiction contest for "Amy", 1989.

Co-winner, *Event's* Creative Non-Fiction contest for "The Letter", 2008

Western Magazine Awards, 2

Eligible for National Public Readings Program :

Yes

WITS

Northern OAC WITS:

No

GST:

GST not applicable

Writer in Residence

We're pleased to announce that we've selected J. Jill Robinson as our 2020-2021 Writer in Residence!

Jill is a Canadian writer, editor and teacher with an MFA in creative writing. She is the author of the novel, *More in Anger*, as well as four collections of short stories. She has contributed to multiple anthologies, magazines and radio broadcasts.

Jill has also served as the editor of *Grain* literary magazine, as Saskatoon Public Library's writer-in-residence, and has extensive experience as a writing mentor, workshop facilitator and editor.

We are thrilled to have her join Regina Public Library on August 24, 2020.

Upcoming Events

Jill will be hosting [online programs for beginning writers](#) each Wednesday. See the **What's Happening** feed at the bottom of this page for details on Jill's upcoming programs, as well as other RPL offerings on writing, publishing, books, and storytelling.

About the Program

The RPL Writer in Residence program provides opportunities for members of the community to receive guidance and advice from an established Canadian writer.

The Writer in Residence offers one-to-one assistance with personal writing projects, as well as public readings, literary activities, school, and community visits, and programs that focus on serving and supporting the amateur writing community in Regina.

The Writer in Residence assists writers by providing:

- Writing advice and suggestions.
- Encouragement.
- Support.
- Insight and assistance with all publishing phases: from research, to writing the first draft to publication.
- A professional critique of their work.

J. Jill Robinson
2020 - 2021 Writer in Residence



Jill is a Canadian writer, editor and teacher with an MFA in creative writing. She is the author of the novel, *More in Anger*, as well as four collections of short stories. She has contributed to multiple anthologies, magazines and radio broadcasts. Jill has also served as the editor of *Grain* literary magazine, as Saskatoon Public Library's writer-in-residence, and has extensive experience as a writing mentor, workshop facilitator and editor. Photo: Emmett Robinson Smith