

## PEER REVIEW

HARRIETT JERNIGAN

Carlson snickered as she cut the heads off the garden gnomes, patiently sluicing through the plaster and wood with her craft saw, lying on her stomach in Ginnie's flower bed, the moon looking over her shoulder as she freed those deluded grins from their torsos. She'd be done by 2:00, and then she'd go home and have a nice cup of cocoa before bed. But she had to get up on time. She wanted to be the first to arrive at brunch the next morning, to go out and cry in surprise, to help Ginnie discover the mass murder in her begonias. Last month, Beatrice had gotten to brunch first and beat her to the punch of finding the dead skunk wrapped in shitty diapers left at Ginnie's front door. No one likes a show-off.

She deserved it, every bit of it, Carlson thought as she drew Hitler mustaches on the disembodied heads and tossed them around her. She would destroy everything Ginnie bought with the money, didn't matter. When she'd pulled out the new champagne flutes for the monthly brunch, Carlson stuck prosciutto to the bottom of the tray so that Jackie, Ginnie's highly-strung Weimaraner, knocked the tray out of her hands and clattering to the floor, turning the Waterford crystal glasses into hundreds of sparkling razors, shredding Ginnie's fingers. She'd dispatched the new laptop in the lab, lacing Ginnie's can of Coke with the syrup of ipecac she'd ordered online. Carlson had pretended to work while waiting for the sickly-sweet emetic to take effect, suppressing a smirk as Ginnie's face twisted just a tiny bit right before she threw up all over her new MacBook, drenching the keyboard with vomit. Carlson had rushed to the rescue with a tea towel, solicitously trying to clear the sick off the computer, smearing it even more into the keyboard. The day after Carlson went over to Ginnie's house and saw her new front door, a \$10,000 orgasm of etched glass, she covered the whole thing in hydrofluoric acid, smearing the curlicues into toddler scratch, and drilled holes into each corner of the frame, so that the whole thing fell out when Ginnie touched it. Ginnie had bawled. Carlson had encouraged her to file a police report. But she didn't.

Every time Carlson questioned her own sanity, thought about calling the whole thing off, her mind returned to that conversation the year before, when Ginnie had called her study worthless.

It won't work. Your numbers are wrong.

Five years of research say they're right.

No one's gonna take you seriously.

We'll see about that.

When Ginnie had accepted the Diebermann Prize, \$100,000 “for her outstanding contributions to theoretical physics,” Carlson had originally planned to kill her. She hadn't cared when she stole Jim from her; she didn't have to buy as much toilet paper and the house didn't smell like feet anymore. She let the cracks about her weight slide, had even forgiven Ginnie for making fun of her lisp in front of their colleagues at that Christmas party. But the Diebermann Prize was beyond the pale.

Carlson had it all planned out, when to kill Ginnie, how to dispose of her silicone carcass, the alibi. Not that anyone would ever suspect her. She'd initially bought Ginnie's bait, hook, line, and sinker, and had never told anyone else about her research, afraid to look even more the fool. And then it became an advantage. As far as everyone else knew, they were still the best of friends. Ginnie didn't have a clue. Stupid cow. She wouldn't know good data if it sat on her face.

Shooting her in the head was too good, disemboweling too quick. Choking the life out of her wouldn't suffice. Carlson kept a running tally of what everything cost—the gnomes had come from the most expensive garden store in town, a shameful \$200 per ugly little dwarf. Ginnie had bought 13—her lucky number, she always said. Carlson would keep going until the 100 grand—at 5% A.P.R., a generous rate—was spent. Then she would kill her. She might even let Ginnie beg for her life first.

Carlson hacked the feet off a couple of the gnomes and threw them behind her, her stomach starting to go numb, the cold of the ground creeping through her layers, even the thermals. She should've brought a blanket, but she liked to travel light on these nights. She sighed as she thought about their friendship, how Ginnie always ended up with the lion's share. She'd held on for too long. She'd hold on a little bit longer, till the money was all spent. Then, she would end it.

She looked forward to it.

Carlson started gathering her things, packing her saw and marker back into her handbag, pooped, ready to go home. She began humming to herself, The worms go in, the worms go out, the worms come tumbling down your

snout. She didn't hear Ginnie sneak up behind her, shovel raised above her head.

As Ginnie brought the shovel down on Carlson's head, she thought of the Mercedes she'd ordered, more precious to her than her children, far superior to any friendship.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Harriett Jernigan earned her B.A. in creative writing and German studies in New College at the University of Alabama and her Ph.D. in German studies and applied linguistics at Stanford. She then spent the next couple of decades bouncing back and forth between Germany and the U.S., teaching English and German and writing fiction and non-fiction. She has published work in *Apt: An Online Journal*, *Telos*, and *German as a Foreign Language*. She recently returned to Stanford to teach writing and rhetoric. When she's not working or writing, she indulges her two other major passions, baking and fencing.