Neighbor

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I squeezed the loaf of bread tighter, as tears burned a path down my dirty cheeks. Here I was, in the middle of the block, on the right side of the street, exactly where my house should be. But it was not.

What evil magic had changed the world? Where was my home, my grandmother waiting for bread? My head turned to the ground. I shrank, my wails now larger than me.

I looked through the fog of tears. There you were: you—the wolf who ate Little Red Riding Hood’s grandmother; Peter, Peter who kept his wife in a pumpkin shell; the witch who tried to push Hansel into the oven.

I’d known who you were since I was four! If I peeked between lilacs and saw you in your garden, I would run. Fridays, I saw taxi drivers bring you home, help you stagger to the door. I heard your wife crying in the night, your son’s shrieks, saw welts and bruises next day—and his eyes.

Now here you were. Kneeling, with a tender voice I’d never heard you use, you asked, What’s the matter, Billye? How could you understand the words I sputtered, saying I was lost?

You touched my shoulder lightly, pointed, and said, Look, you can see your house from here. I bolted across the weedy field, still clutching the bread, not saying thank you.