

Organic Gardening

Short Fiction for Guests of the WordFeeder

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The wrapping on the front door to Marion's suburban house was unusually hard. Whoever it was, he – "It has to be a man," she thought to herself, apprehensively. – had decided to ignore the bell in favor of a less demure announcement of his arrival. There were people coming over at 3 PM, but that was, what...? She checked her watch as she grabbed a towel to wipe her hands on her way out of the kitchen, throwing it over her shoulder. ...22 minutes from now.

Whoever it was knocked again, well less than a minute after the first time. In the hallway now, she was relieved to see the face of "Al" (Alison) Jacobs, her face peering in the glass panel beside the door. Dr. Jacobs had been her physician for more than a decade since her husband had died and she'd moved here to take the only college-level teaching job she could find at the time. Turns out, it was a good choice, a place to make good money and even better friends. "Hey," Al waved to her. Relieved to see it was someone she trusted, Marion picked up her pace and closed the last few feet quickly.

"Hi. You're early." She was talking to Al, but studying the faces of the man and woman she didn't recognize, the man first, then the woman and back to the man standing directly in front of her.

"Mrs. Abrams," the man began to announce himself, extending a business card which Marion took from him. "I'm Special Agent Collier. This is my associate, Agent Macy," he moved his head toward the woman standing behind and to his left, "who called you this morning. "May we come in?"

"Of course." Marion opened the door all the way, stepped back and gestured to the great room where she had freshly made cookies, a few small bottles of water and a pitcher of ice tea nicely arranged on the coffee table around an open space in the middle she'd saved for something. "This way. We can talk in here. It was fall, but still comfortably warm and no coats to worry about.

Agent Macy handed her card to Marion on the way in, accompanied by a perfunctory smile while being certain to make the requisite eye contact her recently completed training demanded. She would forgive the young agent's inexperience, but looking someone in the eyes standing that close to her made Marion want to squint.

"Thank you," Doctor Jacobs was the last one in the door, and the only one of the three who seemed comfortable being there.

"Please, make yourselves at home. I'll be right with you." That courtesy out of the way, Marion went to her refrigerator and took out a tray of a dozen turkey, goat cheese and arugula sprouts sandwiches she had made on small homemade croissants.

“As you can see,” she commented in an attempt to lighten the mood, as she placed the tray in the center of the table, “I watch entirely too much Food TV. ...Please help yourselves.”

Agent Macy, seeing the sprouts protruding artistically from under the perfectly baked crust above them, paused in mid-reach. “Maybe later,” she announced tentatively. “They look delicious,” which they did, she said politely with another attempt at a friendly expression. Marion wondered to herself what Macy would be like if she weren’t on duty, if Special Agent Collier weren’t there – and what made him so “Special.”

Making herself comfortable in her favorite corner of the couch where she’d thrown her sweater to make sure no one sat there, Marion decided to take the lead. Dr. Jacobs was also on the couch to Marion’s left, the two agents having sat in the chairs across from them. “So, uh, what’s this all about? ...When Al, ‘Dr. Jacobs’ called yesterday, she said it was important that we meet as soon as possible. That wasn’t 24 hours ago. What exactly’s..”

“Mrs. Abrams,” Agent Macy didn’t wait for her to finish, “you had an appointment yesterday with Dr. Jacobs for a routine physical, is that right?”

“Yes. Nothing special, jus..”

“And while you were there, Dr. Jacobs observed a small scar on your abdomen?”

“Yes.” It was obvious that the FBI agent, who was following a list of questions she’d typed up and were on the left of her portfolio, a yellow legal pad for taking notes on the right, preferred short answers.

“And you indicated that it was the scar from a voluntary operation in which you gave up one of your kidneys to a non-profit organ live-donor program?”

“That’s correct. I’m only 37, in good health. Why not help someone else who might not make it without me?”

There was quiet.

“Mrs. Abrams,” it was Special Agent Collier talking now, “when did you first think about donating your kidney?”

“Uh, I don’t know exactly. I’m an organ donor, you know, in case of an accident or something and I don’t make it. ...More recently, my friend Joan... She and I have been taking evening classes, part of the Chef’s program offered to adults at the college where we’re on the faculty. We were joking about growing our own fresh herbs and vegetables, and she dared me to plant some arugula – I just love the stuff. – on my deck. ...So I did.”

“How exactly did you do that, Mrs. Abrams?” Agent Macy was asking this time, determined to go through her list of questions.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, how exactly did you plant the arugula? Did you buy small starter plants? Seeds? Did you buy them locally? Through the mail? What, precisely, did you do?”

“Well, uh, ...Joan gave me a website, ‘AuntMinniesFreeSeeds.org.’ It’s a non-profit that sends you free seeds for vegetables to encourage people to grow their own healthy foods.”

“Is that what you did, you went there, on-line, and ordered some of their seeds?”

“Sure. For arugula. The stuff grows almost overnight. I didn’t know things grew that fast, and the arugula you get is... Well, it just tastes great, so much better than the mostly non-organic produce you buy at the store. Really delicious. It’s on the sandwiches.” Marion reached to lift of the tray of croissant sandwiches no one had sampled yet. “Here, try one,” but then realized there were no takers. It was quiet again as she put the tray down while she half-heartedly delivered the Aunt Minnie’s slogan, “You know, ‘Home grown vegetables with the flavor that out of this world.’”

“What do the seeds,” Agent Macy continued down her list, “have to do with your donating a kidney, Mrs. Abrams?”

“Well, on the website and on the DVD they send with the seeds – Loved it, by the way. Must have watched it a dozen times. I’m doing carrots next, I think, and then the herbs. Anyway, they make a pitch for you to donate a kidney, to be a live donor, to appreciate what you’ve done for someone else while you can. ...It was... compelling and I decided not to wait and contacted them.”

“You called Aunt Minnie’s?”

“No, they give you a toll-free number to call to make arrangements for you with a local hospital. A nurse came over and took a medical history, gave me a simple exam, took a blood sample, gave me diet advice, you know, to make sure I was eating well – lot’s of arugula!” She laughed, but was the only one who thought it was funny. “The darker the vegetable’s color, the better it is for you,” she said tentatively, wondering if either of the agent’s could have cared less. “Aunt Minnie’s arugula are unusually dark... dark green.” They were just letting her talk.

“Was that the last time you saw the nurse before the operation?”

“No, there was another blood sample a month later, and then she called a few days after that to set up an appointment. They picked me up, took me to the hospital for outpatient surgery, and I was home that evening.” The blank stares on their faces was beginning to trouble her.

“Everything went great.”

“Marion.”

“Yes, Dr. Jacobs.”

“Would you mind lifting your t-shirt and pulling down your sweats just a bit to show us the scar? I’m sorry to...”

“No. It’s okay,” Marion got up from the couch, turning slightly toward the two agents. “It’s almost gone.” And so it was, with only the faintest of lines still showing, almost unnoticeable.

Taking an 8 by 11 print out of the file folder she brought with her, Dr. Jacobs showed it to the agents. “This was taken yesterday afternoon, around 4:20 when Marion and I were finishing up. As you can see, the scar was minimal then, but still much more prominent than it is now.”

“Today’s Saturday, Mrs. Abrams. You had the kidney removed on Monday? Last Monday?”

“So?” The answer was “Yes,” but she didn’t get the point of the question.

“Marion, this incision should still have the stitches, shouldn’t be close to healing. In fact, there’s no indication there ever were stitches or staples. As best I can tell, it must have been glued shut, but I’ve never seen anything this neat. Surgical scars usually take years to disappear, if ever. ...More to the point, the CT scan we did...”

“Are you saying they didn’t actually remove my kidney?”

“No, they took it out, it’s just that the scan shows that it’s growing back, and fast. A couple of weeks from now at the rate it’s growing, we’re not going to know you ever gave one up in the first place.”

“ So,” Marion was beginning to get the point, “how rare is this, Al?”

“This is never, Marion. I honestly don’t know what’s...”

“Mrs. Abrams,” Special Agent Collier interrupted, not wanting the Doctor to speculate or tell her too much. “You say they picked you up to take you to the hospital?”

“Yes?”

“Well,” hearing the inflection in Marion’s voice, “did they or didn’t they?”

“Look, what are you getting at? I told you, they picked me up.”

“Mrs. Abrams,” Agent Macy seemed concerned that her superior was being too severe. “One of your neighbors, the retired couple in the house with the blue siding across the street...”

“Yes, I know who you mean. The ‘Franks.’”

“That’s right. Apparently they were working in their yard Monday morning, mulching, planting some new bushes to replace the ones the deer have been eating.”

“What’s your point, Agent Macy?” Marion was getting impatient and more than a bit anxious.

“They told us that an ambulance picked you up around 10 AM. That someone knocked on your door...”

“The nurse I told you about.”

“...and that you got in the back of the ambulance and left with them.”

“That’s right. I told you...”

“And that you were back before 11. They know, because Mr. Stevens, your mailman, dropped off the mail and he never comes after 11. Never. They’re retired. Apparently getting the mail is a big deal for them. Letters from their grandchildren, occasional orders for some costume jewelry Mrs. Franks makes and sells on-line.”

“That’s pretty much true, I mean that the mail comes in the morning, but so what?”

“Mrs. Abrams, the ‘So what?’ is that you were gone for less than an hour. You told us you didn’t get back from outpatient surgery until late the in afternoon. An hour isn’t enough time for you to get to the hospital, do the surgery, recover and get back. Our specialist...”

“And I agree, Marion,” Dr. Jacobs wanted Marion to understand that what Agent Macy was saying made sense.

“...the surgeon who’s working with us says you should have been kept overnight.”

“More to the point,” Agent Collier’s voice commanded a whole higher level of attention,” there’s no hospital or clinic within 100 miles of here has any record of your checking in or any surgery that could have anything to do with removing your kidney – or transplanting it or sending it to any recipient.”

“But I remember going to the hospital. I got home. Turned on the evening news in my bedroom and slept for about an hour.” And Marion decided to stop talking. Feeling herself breathing faster, she remembered not to hyperventilate like she did twice when she was in college.

“Marion,” Doctor Jacobs say the change in her patient’s face, “are you okay.”

“What are you trying to tell me?” Her voice was resolute now, Marion’s mind pushing its way through the reality she was just beginning to fully appreciate.

“There’s more, Marion.” This morning, after I called Agent Macy – The FBI had sent a bulletin to doctors in the area to look out for situations like this. – I called the lab and had them pull a blood sample you gave us a year ago. They’ve started saving small samples in case we need a baseline for some reason. With your permission, I’d like take a fresh sample today. I’ve got my bag in the car.”

“Why? What are you looking for? Am I sick?”

“We don’t think so,” Agent Collier tried to reassure her. “At least none of the other cases have had...”

“What other cases?”

“There have been others, 74 that we know about, in three states. All of them bought seeds – genetically altered seeds – from the same website, watched the save DVD and ate what they grew. Exceptionally rapid healing, and the kidneys they had removed grew back. Three of the 74, as far as we know, actually donated their kidneys a second time before we found out about it.”

“If I’m okay, why do you need another blood sample, Al?”

“Because the others have experienced changes to their DNA.”

“What?!”

“I know, I know, Marion, it sounds... Well, I know how it must sound. The FBI has some of the best geneticists in the country working on it. ...Marion?”

“What do I do now?”

“We’re going to have an FBI psychologist work with you. Here’s her card. She’ll call you tomorrow. She’s heading up the team that has been studying the DVD and any hypnotic suggestion it may have given you and the others.”

“By the way,” Agent Macy added, “the same thing’s happened to your friend Joan, except that we caught her before they picked her up. ...And now she can’t reach the nurse, and the website’s gone.”

Two hundred eighty-seven miles away, at the small grocery store that served the rural town too far from the nearest city of any size...

“What are these, Bobby?” Jake, the Manager, one of his part-time stock clerk who worked there weekdays after school.

“They’re free samples of herbs from a new organic supplier. ...Here. This is the sign that goes with it. There’s a website people can visit for more free samples if they’re interested. ...Should I put them out?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Here’s the packing slip that the driver gave me.”

“Thanks. ...Let’s see,” he began reading out loud, “‘For more samples and information about our seeds and other ready-to-eat produce, e-mail AMinnie@OrionOrganicFarms.us, *Delicious locally grown organic herbs and vegetables, with flavor that’s out of this world.*’ ...Yeah, sure. ...Okay, let’s get them out there.”

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