

Thump, thump, thump. Josh felt the musty stench drift up his nose as he flew down the grubby gray-carpeted stairs and out the cold metal door with his bouncing sister in his arms. The cold air stung his already chapping cheeks as he sprang out into the fresh air. He was going to be late to school if he did not sprint the five blocks to the station and catch the bus that was leaving in five minutes. He first had to drop Libby off at her special school for kids with Down syndrome.

Josh ran as fast as he could with a rather chubby six-year-old in his arms. He bounded down the sidewalk, Libby bouncing happily in his arms. As Josh breathed in heavily, the icy cold air stung his throat and set his lungs on fire. Josh rounded the corner and looked up at the big red brick building looming over him. It took up about three quarters of the block. This house was very familiar to Josh yet remained a mystery. Every day, Josh dropped his little sister off at the door and went no further. Yet Josh had no idea what went on inside the fanciful structure. There were wrought iron gates standing tall in front of the red brick structure. Josh pushed open the gates with the slightest creak, and stepped inside the fake plastic-looking but beautiful yard.

There were flowers of all colors situated all over the huge yard in the most whimsical fashion. It always amazed Josh at how there were flowers in the yard during winter the same as spring and summer. The flowers always looked the same. They always looked too perfect. Countless times Josh had gone up to them and checked if they were real. They always were.

Again, as he walked up the path, Josh's thoughts drifted toward the mysteriously perfect flowers. He was tempted to feel the flowers again just to make sure they were not fake. Josh swatted the temptation away like a fly. He started walking up the concrete pathway to the newly painted navy blue door. Josh was about halfway up the pathway when he looked up.

He saw one big window above the front door. There stood a tall thin woman. She was about fifty-five years old. Her skin was slightly wrinkled and she wore an expression of boredom on her tired face. Her strikingly pale lips were curled down into a frown. Her gray hair was pulled into a bun that rested on the back of her neck. Not one hair was out of place. On her pointed nose rested deep blue rectangular glasses. She was wearing a stark white blouse and an antique ivory cardigan with lace covering the sleeves. She was looking out at the street,

peeking out from between starched white curtains. When Josh looked up she sharply turned her head down toward him and made eye contact with him. Josh quickly snapped his head forward. He could feel her gaze following him as he walked towards the door.

When Josh got to the door, he knocked on it with his freezing cold knuckles. When the door opened, he was half hoping to see the tall slim figure of the strange lady. Instead, when the door opened, he saw the opposite.

A rather fat lady with long flowing auburn hair greeted them. She was about thirty years old and she was wearing a genuine smile. She had a look of warmth about her. Each day, she greeted him with the same warmth and the same smile. She wore a knee length red billowing dress.

“Hello, Josh, Libby! How are you folks today?” she said with her silky voice.

“Fine, Mrs. August. How are you?” Josh replied.

“I’m quite all right. Thanks for asking!” said Mrs. August.

Josh looked past her into the house. He saw a grand mahogany staircase in front and to the left of him, curved along the wall up to the next level. On the ceiling, an even grander diamond chandelier hung elegantly from the navy ceiling. On the right, in front of Josh, was a stained glass window with the same flowers from the yard on it. The light flooded through the window in multicolored beams.

Josh had always felt the school was strange but it was comforting to know that it would always be there to help his sister. Today was different though. The presence of the strange lady in the window was unsettling to him. As he dropped Libby to the ground, he felt nervous as if this was not the place that he had dropped his little sister off every morning for many years. He watched Libby’s chubby legs run into the house and stand by Mrs. August.

“We’ll see you later, Josh,” said Mrs. August with a smile.

She started closing the door as Libby dashed up the stairs.

Josh turned and started to walk down the familiar pathway. He pushed open the gates and shoved his hands into his pockets. Josh headed for the bus stop, just remembering that he was going to be late. He sprinted down the sidewalk and made it just in time to hop on.

The next day, when Josh went back to drop Libby off, the strange lady wasn't there. A couple days later, Josh finally decided there was nothing to her. He decided that she was just a visitor or an inspector.

The next month, Josh saw the strange lady again. He was walking through the gate and looked up. This time she was far back from the window. As far away as Josh was, he could tell that the lady didn't have as many wrinkles. She looked slightly younger and not as skinny as he had remembered. Josh could tell, though, that it was the same lady. He felt puzzled as he kept walking up the path.

Josh got to the navy blue door and knocked. He noticed the paint was starting to chip. Mrs. August opened the door with slightly less warm of a smile than usual.

"Good morning," she said flatly.

Josh stared at Mrs. August. She was thinner than she used to be. Mrs. August pulled her auburn eyebrows together and stared back with an inquiring look on her face.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

Josh cleared his throat.

"Uh, no, nothing's wrong," he said quickly.

"Okay, come on in," she said to Libby.

Josh set Libby on the ground. She stood there like a statue. Josh gave her a slight push and she stumbled forward into the house.

"Good-bye," Mrs. August said and shut the door in his face.

Josh turned and walked away not bothering to turn around and look up. He knew that the strange lady was there because he could feel her eyes boring into the back of his head.

Every day, Josh looked up at the window cautiously, to see if the strange lady was there. One particularly gloomy and cold day he did just that. The strange lady was no where to be seen. Josh deepened his stride feeling relieved as he did every day when he looked up and saw closed curtains. He knocked on the door and it swung open. His face fell immediately. Mrs. August was looking worse than ever. She was wearing a deep scowl and a gray dress. She looked even thinner than the previous week.

Josh looked past her to the stairs. His mouth fell open. Standing there on the stairs was the strange lady. She was looking younger than ever. Instead of the plain white shirt and ivory cardigan she had worn before, she was wearing a vibrant red silk shirt with ruffles on the collar. Her hair was no longer in a bun, but flowing down her back. Her deep blue glasses rested on her pointed nose.

Josh looked back at Mrs. August. She was staring at him intently, her eyes boring into his, with her scowl still etched deeply into her face.

“H-hi,” Josh stuttered.

“Set her down then,” Mrs. August said.

Josh ignored her.

“Who is that?” Josh spat the question out and held his breath.

“Who is who?” she asked.

“That lady on the stairs.”

Mrs. August turned around and looked at the stairs.

“I don’t see anyone,” she said, turning back around.

Josh would have argued, but he had half expected her to react that way. Josh let Libby down with even more reluctance than previous days. Libby’s startlingly blue eyes looked up at his even bluer ones.

“Who did you see?” she asked.

“No one,” he responded shortly. Josh wanted to scoop Libby up and take her home. He resisted.

The next day Josh went back to the house to drop Libby off. He walked up to the door and rapped his knuckles on the wood, noticing that the navy blue paint was chipping even more than before. The door swung open. Standing there was a lady wearing deep blue rectangular glasses on her pointed nose.