

## Parallel Lives

by J. L. Owens

Jo was cleaning the garage quite vigorously to the sound of the radio that she failed to see the frame of a figure walk up the driveway and into the garage. The music went silent and immediately Jo turned around. It was the next door neighbor's daughter, Kate.

Jo recalled the day they had moved into the neighborhood. A big yellow moving van sat in the driveway of the medium sized, white house on the corner. A mini-van drove up to reveal a family of five; a mother and a father, a son and two daughters. Jo's eyebrows immediately lifted as the two girls walked up to the white house in a single file, both blonde haired and blue eyed. At first glance they seemed almost identical, except one looked older and the other still had chubby adolescent cheeks. Junior high, Jo immediately thought as she scanned the younger one. Jo's eyes followed the older girl in and out of the house all morning long as the family unloaded everything from the moving van. She had pin pointed the older girl's age to be plus or minus of about sixteen years of age, the age of herself. The efficiency of the family to remove the boxes and furniture from the truck made Jo glance at the father's hair and notice the buzz cut. Obviously, military.

Now Jo stood face to face with Kate, the youngest of the daughters, or what seemed to be at least face to chest, and glared.

"Karen says your music is too loud and she can hear it in the backyard." the young blonde said with a defiant stare.

Jo cocked her head out of the side of the garage to see a figure lying in a lawn chair, in the backyard of the neighbors, tanning herself to a crisp color of bacon.

"Does your sister always send you over to do her dirty work?" Jo asked as she turned the radio back on and tuned the station to play classic oldies.

The little girl's hands immediately went to her hips and her bottom lip fell short of the ground. Jo laughed as she watched the girl stomp off and away from her.

Since the first day the new neighbors had moved in they had been nothing but trouble. True, one of the neighbors was her age but this only drew interest from the neighbor boys. Immediately, boys and their cars and trucks would start to slowly cruise by, allowing time to smile and stare. Jo hated this. She wanted nothing more but to get away from the main direction of the boy's traffic, and to hide in her house all summer. .

A car pulled into the driveway and the driver was all too familiar. Steven was Jo's best friend. He stepped over the many piles of junk as he stopped to pick up a basketball and dribble it a few times before yelling catch and throwing it at Jo's body. She immediately caught it and slammed it into a box beside her.

"What's new in the neighborhood?" he asked as he looked around the side of the garage to the neighbor's backyard.

"She's sun bathing again," Jo curdled. "How can anyone like that much sun is beyond me."

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The sound of the wooden gate opening beside the garage immediately stopped the conversation and then Karen walked into the front of her yard holding a beach towel and a book. She wore a two-piece bathing suit in bright florescent colors.

"Are you going to turn your damn music down?" Karen barked.

Jo looked at her. "I don't think it's that loud."

"Ugh, you people are all so rude and creepy, I swear!"

Steven finally spoke, "What does that mean?"

"It means all you homosexuals or whatever you call yourselves, all need to get away from me!"

Karen turned away and stomped off. Her front door slammed as she closed it.

Steven looked dismayed. Never had he witnessed or been a part of something like that. To blatantly bash someone because of who they are. He looked at his best friend. She wasn't hideous looking; she didn't have the stench of anything bad. Of course she liked girls, it had always been that way but he never had minded. After all, he liked girls too.

"Come on," Jo said in a low, almost muted mutter. "Let's go inside."

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Later on that day Steven went home and Jo finished cleaning the garage. It was a long and doughty task, taking almost the rest of the afternoon. By the time she was finished, the garage looked well organized and clean. Jo sneezed as she walked into the house and noticed the layers of dirt and grime on her body. She immediately felt the need to take a shower and wash off.

As she turned on the faucet, Jo thought about the first day that she had come face to face with Karen. Jo was in her backyard silently swinging on the tree swing. She was listening to the neighbor girls argue about something and the little brother was throwing a ball up against the side of the house. The sound of the sister's reminded Jo of mice, the kind of incessant streaking and squeaking you would hear from two furry critters fighting it out over which part of a cage. The only thing that broke the shrill noise was the sound of a bouncing ball thumping against the pavement.

Suddenly the noise of the ball stopped and Jo watched as the ball flew over the side of the fence into her yard. The shrieking stopped and the boy started to cry. Jo scooped the ball up into her hands and threw it back over the fence, hearing it bounce a few times before someone caught it. Immediately, two blonde heads popped up from the fence and stared at Jo. The smallest girl was the first to speak.

"I know who you are, my cousin said you are a dyke."

The oldest girl eyes opened wide at the comment.

"Kate, get down from here," she yelled.

"But Karen, Mary Sue said that . . ."

"I don't care, get down!"

The older girl pulled the younger off the fence and took one last look at Jo before she too made her way to the ground. Jo listened to the muffled sound of voices for a while and then went back in the house still stunned and amused by the little girl's comment.

She had faced homophobic people before but never someone as young as herself. It had always been the people out front of Wal-Mart giving information on the Knight Initiative or the local politician on the television. On occasion it was Ku Klux Klan members at the Gay Pride Festival in San Francisco or her Principal at her high school.

"You have to expect this sort of treatment if you intend to live as you live." he once said.

Jo finished her shower, taking a rather long one because she knew as soon as she was out that she would be immediately bored. It was already 2:30 in the afternoon. The garage was clean, Steven was gone and Jo had nothing to do.

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Karen read the last line in her book she was reading before closing it, making sure to mark the page for next time. Her back had already begun to feel burned so she decided her daily sun bathing was over for the day. She folded her towel and walked to the front door to open it but found a surprise when she couldn't. It was locked. Oh no, she thought, Mom must have locked it when they left. Immediately, Karen ran around to the back door only to find that it was locked too. She panicked and started scratching at all the back windows with her fingers. They wouldn't budge. She sat there on the back porch for some time and thought.

It was thirty minutes before Karen decided to walk to a neighbors house to call her Mom. She felt stupid as she crossed the street on with her bare feet. She ran because the pavement was hot and it burned. She recalled the time that she watched her Dad's truck drive away in the heat of the summer, leaving tar tracks as he left. She knocked on the door and then realized there was a doorbell so she rang that too. No one answered. She looked in the driveway but there wasn't a car. She turned and looked at the whole neighborhood and not a car was in sight. The only sign of anyone around was the open garage at the house next to her. The house next door.

Karen looked at her options. Either I wait all day outside for someone to get home or I wait at someone else's house.

Immediately, a car drove by with two young men. They whistled loud as they sped past, calling "hey babe" and "sexy." Great, Karen thought. Just great.

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Jo had been watching for some time while Karen sat on her front porch. It was obvious that she was locked out of her own house. Jo laughed. It already had been an hour and a half. Karen was leaning her back on the step of her front porch. She looked tired and as if any minute she was going to fall over. The weather channel said it was 101 degrees but Jo didn't notice the heat, after all, she was in an air-conditioned house. Anyone was suicidal to be outside for longer than 10 minutes.

Good, Jo thought. She deserves to suffer a little, but only a little.

Jo went back to watching the television. Teletubbies bounced on the screen and she changed the channel. She never could quite understand how people thought the purple one was gay. I mean, she thought, he does carry a purse but it's a children's show for crying out loud. Some poor adult must have been really bored one day. On the next channel was a great movie about flying aliens and how they were bent on destroying the Earth. Jo looked out the window again at Karen. This time she looked as if she was asleep. She went back watching the television, flipping the channels as she got bored.

She paused for a moment with the remote in her hand and thought about the heat. Last year Jo was in a soccer tournament and one of the moms on the sideline fainted. The heat had been too much for her. Jo looked out the window again and Karen was in the same position she was before.

Jo opened her front door and stared at Karen, unmoving. What if . . . Jo thought, she fainted or something? What if she needs help? Jo took a step forward. What if she might be dying or something? What if she's dead? Jo started to run towards her. And I watched her die! She almost skidded as she stopped near Karen and bent down. She put her hand on Karen's shoulder and immediately Karen looked up, surprised.

"Eww. . . get away from me!"

Jo jumped back startled. "I just thought you fainted or something."

"What's your problem, freak? Can't you see I don't like you?" Karen stood up. "Go away."

Jo turned and started walking back home. She felt humiliated. She felt hurt. She was only trying to help.

Thirty minutes later Karen was still on her front porch, this time with her towel over her head. Jo had become content on watching Karen through her window. Why is she being so mean? Jo thought. All I had done was make sure she was okay and what do I get? I get yelled at. It's not my fault she is dumb and locked herself out of her house in this heat. What ever have I done to her? The questions filled her head and she found herself standing up and pacing. She felt as if she has swallowed a hard metal ball and it was weighing down her stomach. Jo grabbed her cell phone from off of the coffee table and walked out the front door. Karen noticed Jo when she first opened the front door. She rolled her eyes and glared.

"What is up with you, go away!"

"At least call someone or something," Jo said defiantly, "so you don't look dumb sitting out here."

Jo could see Karen was contemplating it. Her eyes wandered to the phone and then to Karen's eyes. Karen turned away quickly noticing Jo was watching her intensely.

"No."

Jo still held the phone towards her.

"Whatever, then don't take it."

Jo walked back home and decided the girl was totally nuts. She sat back down to watch her movie. Let her be stupid, Jo thought. She's only hurting herself.

As another hour went by Karen knew she should have taken the phone. But who was she to call? She still didn't know either of her parents phone numbers at work and she had no friends to call upon her need for a spare key. She sighed miserably. She could just go over there and knock on the door and ask to use the phone and call someone. The girl after all, was trying to help. She got up slowly.

By the time she reached the door she already had her hand to knock but as she did the door opened. It was Jo. Karen nervously put her hand down.

"I don't know my mom's work number." She guiltily explained. Jo nodded silently. They stood there staring at each other for that

moment. Karen knew she had acted like a jerk. Jo knew she should be nice and invite the girl in but still she hesitated.

"And I'm sorry I called you a freak." Karen said looking down. "I know I've been a jerk but I guess since I just moved here it is different. I'm not used to it, that is all."

Jo nodded again and spoke. "I'm sorry that I played my music too loud. I did it partly to bug you." Karen looked surprised. She never expected an apology from Jo.

"Would you like to come in?" Jo finally asked. "I've been watching TV and you are welcome to join me until your parents get home."

Karen smiled. "I'd appreciate it. Thanks."

Just as Karen stepped into the doorway a car turned the corner down the road and came closer, parking in the driveway next door. It was Karen's mom. Her mom got out and waved.

"Oh, I should get going. She's home."

"Yeah."

"But, I'll see you around."

"Yeah, I'll see you around."

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The next day Jo was out in the garage. She sat there in a lawn chair quietly waiting for Steven to arrive. He was supposed to stop over around lunchtime. When he arrived he was all smiles and happiness.

"So anything interesting happen yesterday?"

"Ummm. . . . nope. I just cleaned the garage."

Steven noticed the radio wasn't on. He walked over to it to turn it on but Jo stopped him.

"No," she said, "it will bug the neighbor."

Just when Steven was about to reply Karen walked through her back gate and up to her own front porch with a shiny new key in

her hand. She put it in the lock and opened the door but before she went in she waved.

Jo smiled and waved back and Steven was puzzled.

"Now you can turn the music on," Jo said. "She went inside."

"What?" Steven asked. "Am I in some parallel universe or something or did I just see you two get along? What happened yesterday?"

Jo smiled a big grin. She knew she crossed a life parallel to her own yesterday. Karen wasn't so awful. She looked out into the open air and walked out into the sun. That day Jo found that Karen wasn't so bad. Yes, and the sun wasn't so bad either.