

# 1

**T**HIS IS HOW THINGS LOOK:

Shady Pines Apartments, four shabby buildings tucked off the road near the highway. Across from a strip mall with nail places and a cash-loan store that advertises on TV all the time. There's also a drugstore and tiny restaurants, every one opening and closing within months.

Shady Pines is nice enough, if it's all you can afford. The stairs are chipped but solid, the washing machines always work, and management picks up the trash once a week.

A few mothers sit outside their buildings, resting in fraying lawn chairs and talking over each other while their children run around, playing. One dog lies sleeping in the

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sun, twitching its tail when a child comes over and pats the top of its head before running away, giggling.

That man in the far building, the car guy, is outside, a pile of parts scattered on the black ooze of the parking lot around him. Car guy has been here since you moved in, but you never see him except for sunny weekends, when he works on his car.

Not that he ever drives it.

He's a strange one, that's for sure, living alone, always with that car, not really ever talking to anyone, but every place has one weirdo, and at least car guy cleans up after himself. He's almost obsessive about it.

Still, see how he sighs when that man, the one whose daughter is quiet and, sadly, a little slow, pulls into the space next to his? See how he watches the girl get out of the car? She's a skinny little thing, always hunching over a bit, like she's taller than she thinks she is. Homeschooled, of course, because of how she is, or so someone once told you when you were getting the mail, and there are no secrets around here, not with everyone living so close together.

She walks slowly across the lot, trailing behind her father, who waits patiently for her to get to the building door, holding it open even though he's carrying all the bags. She doesn't even say thank you, but what can you expect? Kids never know how good they have it.

## 2

**T**HIS IS HOW THINGS ARE:

Cold, from the grocery store, from the dairy aisle you walked down to pick up the yogurt, from the frozen-food aisle, its cases filled deep with frozen pizzas and ice cream in large round containers.

Cold, getting out of the truck, foot clinking over something metallic, piece of a car lying on the ground.

Don't stop to look.

Walk up the stairs, Ray's footsteps behind you. Listen to him pause, smiling at the one open apartment door, the Indian family on the second floor, always children running in and out, sometimes their TV turned up so loud at night Ray has to go down there and knock on the door, say please turn it down? Thank you so much.

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“Was that guy in the parking lot looking at you?” Ray says when you walk into the apartment, as soon as the door thunks closed and he’s turned the locks, one, two, three. Better safe than sorry, he always says.

Shake your head no, no. Even if he did look, it would never be at you.

No one ever really looks at you.

Ray puts the groceries away, yogurt in the fridge, his oatmeal in its individual packets in the cabinet above the sink. Five apples, one for each day when he comes home from work. Five TV dinners you’ll heat up at night for him to eat unless he brings something home.

He comes over to the sofa. Holds out a glass of water so cold the sides are frosty, ice cubes clinking inside. You’ve pulled your skirt up to your waist, arms resting by your sides, palms up and open. Waiting.

“Good,” he says, and lies on top of you. Heavy and pushing, always pushing. “Good girl, Alice.”

Afterward, he will give you the water and a container of yogurt. He will sit with one hand curled around your knee. You will watch TV together. He will tell you how lucky you are.

“Yes,” you will say. “I know I am.”

# 3

**O**NCE UPON A TIME, I DID NOT LIVE  
in Shady Pines.

Once upon a time, my name was not Alice.  
Once upon a time, I didn't know how lucky I was.

# 4

**I**EAT FOURTEEN CHOCOLATE-HAZELNUT candies, round and wrapped in silver foil that crackles when I snap it open.

I also eat six cookies, long brittle tubes filled with chocolate, one puffy cheesy thing that tastes old, all grease and bitterness, and two mints before a woman in a sky blue shirt comes out and calls my name.

The women I'm sitting with, all older, all reading magazines that promise quick dinners and happier children, look relieved.

They've noticed the pile of wrappers around me, noticed how I sat and ate while they sipped diet sodas or water and gave each other cautious looks if they

LIVING DEAD GIRL

reached near the candy when grabbing another magazine.

They know I do not quite belong here, that there is something not quite right about me.

But they will do nothing about it. They will say nothing, ask no questions. No one does. No one has.

No one ever will.

“Alice?” the woman in the sky blue shirt asks again, and I stand up, swallowing a last bit of cookie. Flour and sugar, brittle sweet.

There is a plastic decoration on the wall across from me; clear rippled plastic resting against a blue wall. A reverse ocean, with no water for anyone to drown in.

I can see myself in the plastic and it waves me into a strange, distorted creature, the shadow of something or someone.

I look wrong.

I look dead.

I’m not, though. I’m only partway there, a living dead girl.

I have been for five years.