

Seneca stared unflinchingly across the open space where her fence had, until that morning, stood the usual six feet high. She had never seen the adjacent backyard. Only the thick photinias had ever been visible, sentinels above the shared fence line, adding to the illusion of privacy between neighbors. She had sometimes heard splashing in the sweltering afternoons, and feminine laughter in multi-generations floating her way on a hot wind. She thought now, on reflection, that she'd heard the unmistakable jumbled sounds of a party – clinking glasses, muted music from somewhere in the house, garbled voices talking over each other – a handful of times in the six years she'd lived here. And once, about two months ago, she had caught the strident, angry rhythms of an argument reverberating from within the walls next door.

It wasn't that strange, really, to have exchanged nothing but nods and waves with the family next door, in the previous six years. She barely knew most of the people in the neighborhood, but it was her schedule. Nursing nights made it hard to fit in with the patterns of the world. She slept while the houses around her pulsed with regular routines – school, work, errands, weekend bar-b-ques. When the neighbors rolled up the streets, she buckled into her ancient pick-up and headed to the bowels of the trauma center where she worked all night. Conversations at the vending machine with fellow nurses made up the bulk of her social life. Stolen half hours at Sun Day's, the all-night griddle off the alley where the ambulances parked, counted as going out. In an emergency room teeming with the darkness, and the deeds born in it, her life consisted of trying to put broken people back together, and her connections were to the ill, the injured, and the dying.

Not long after the fight she'd overheard, police swarmed the house next door. Seneca, used to creeping into her driveway unnoticed in the pre-dawn half-light, found on that first day that she couldn't even get close enough to park near her street. After 20 minutes sitting still in a traffic jam worthy of Houston, she'd made a U-turn, parked at the clubhouse, and walked home.

Cars filled the cul-de-sac, spilling into the main artery of the neighborhood, clogging the flow. Neighbors in a lot of pajamas clustered haphazardly on various lawns. As she got closer to her street faces became more familiar. Rounding her corner, holding up a hand to shield her eyes from the piercing, revolving red and blue lights of a dozen police cars, she tripped on loose gravel. Mr. Minton caught her by the elbows before she could fall.

Flustered, Seneca thanked him and meant to keep walking. She was as curious as the next person, but not enough to insert herself into one of the little groups. This kind of emergency response meant whatever happened next door would be on the news before the sun came up anyway. Mr. Minton didn't notice her move to leave. He held onto her left arm and started talking.

"Sandrine's missing, and everyone thinks Scott killed her," he said, frankly.

Seneca recoiled, pulling herself loose. "Why?" She didn't mean to ask. It just came out.

Mrs. Minton continued, "She didn't show up to teach her yoga class yesterday. She hasn't missed a day in seven years. Some of the girls say she told them that if she went missing, Scott probably killed her, so 15 minutes after class started and she wasn't there, and didn't answer her phone, two of the girls came over here. They say the back door was open and there was blood on their bathroom floor."

The others in the group all had things to add, and Seneca's head buzzed sickly while the details came at her like random arrows.

“The police came yesterday when Scott was just leaving.”

“He said Sandrine took herself to the clinic on Fairfax with a sprain.”

“He was agitated.”

“They didn’t believe him.”

“They saw bloody clothes.”

“They came back with a warrant.”

“Its Shelbi I’m worried about, who is going to take care of that poor baby?”

“They found a shovel and gasoline in the back of his car.”

“He took Shelbi with him to get rid of Sandrine’s body.”

“You know she’s on the spectrum, non-verbal they say. She won’t be able to tell them anything.”

“She’s only 7, even if she could tell them anything they couldn’t use it, she’s too young.”

“I never liked him, he smiles too much but it never reaches his eyes, you know what I mean?”

“Sandrine does everything for that baby girl, what is going to happen to her?”

“Cynthia is still there, she helps with Shelbi.”

“Who is Cynthia?”

“Sandrine’s mama. The Grandmother.”

“Where was she when Scott killed Sandrine?”

The speculations flew fast. In under two minutes Seneca heard the theories, the known details, and for the first time, the names of her next-door neighbors. She’d known them as the Carsons because their name was on the mailbox.

She’d slipped away while the accusations and worries continued.

For weeks, news crews and police and the curious public filled the streets. The story headlined every broadcast, even in the middle of the night, even in the E.R. where Seneca heard the latest. A picture of Scott Carson, smirking dead-eyed (Seneca shuddered, her neighbor was right about his eyes, he looked like he had no soul) at the camera, hand-cuffed between two police officers, caught the attention of outraged citizens and was repeatedly posted on social media. Some of Sandrine’s friends and associates formed search parties and publicly vowed to find Sandrine and bring Scott to justice, to “wipe that sick smile off his face.”

Scott’s bail was set at two million dollars, but he paid and went under house arrest with an ankle monitor, while the search groups grew along with the public’s fury. Scott didn’t return to their street. As far as Seneca could tell, the grandmother and the little girl had stayed next door, and what looked like more family members had come to stay.

As the days passed with no sign of Sandrine, the crowds thinned around the neighborhood. Search groups still grew by the day and new theories and search locations popped up regularly on social media, though no new evidence had been found.

Seneca had planned to put in a new fence in the early spring but had rescheduled the project because the streets were impassable at first, when Sandrine disappeared.

This morning, two months later, the crew had finally come. Seneca was asleep when the work began. By the time she woke in the late afternoon, the old fence was gone and new posts had been set in concrete around her backyard. With a rare day (night) off stretching before her, Seneca ambled, half-awake, to her coffee pot. Once the sweet steam was wafting past her nose, she stepped out to survey the fencing progress.

Three steps out, what caught her eye was the backyard next door. With the fence down, it turned out there was a good bit of space between the photinias, and she could see much of the yard on the other side. Nestled under a lush canopy of crepe myrtles, the little girl - Shelbi - sat coloring at a picnic table, a huge box of crayons near her right hand. Under the table, her legs swung happily and she was humming and smiling. Every few moments she said some things Seneca couldn't make out, looking up at the woman across the table. The woman's low voice sounded warm and teasing. She giggled with Shelbi, looking at the drawing the little girl pushed across the table.

Seneca had never met them. The closest she'd ever been to any of them was from her own driveway, while they were in theirs, coming or going with groceries, gym bags, and stuffed toys. Until two months ago she hadn't even known their names. These were her anxious thoughts while she stared, unflinchingly, at Sandrine Carson. Sitting at the picnic table in her own backyard, as she must have done hundreds of times, playing with her little girl.

Before Seneca could form a coherent thought, the plump older woman named Cynthia emerged from the depths of the house with two glasses of something on ice. She set one in front of Shelbi and boomed good-naturedly, "What are you giggling on about, little girl?"

Shelbi babbled at her Grandmother, looked at her mother and babbled some more, and pointed at her picture. Seneca couldn't tell what the child was saying, but Cynthia seemed to understand. "Well that is the prettiest rainbow I ever did see," Cynthia smiled. She picked up the crayons. "Its about time for your dinner, little bit. Let's go inside."

Shelbi climbed down to follow her Grandmother, babbling still, motioning toward her mother.

Cynthia paused and put the crayons back on the table. "I guess you could come out after dinner and color some more, then." She took Shelbi's hand and the two disappeared under the porch.

Sandrine just watched Shelbi and Cynthia leave, then turned to study the picture her daughter left on the table, head bowed, long dark hair a curtain brushing the page.

And while questions tumbled through Seneca's mind, Sandrine looked up and turned her head, meeting Seneca's gaze.

She smiled, absently. It was a distracted half-smile, but it jarred Seneca out of her daze. She shook herself slightly and forced a smile back.

Sandrine's eyes widened. She seemed to really look at Seneca now, and she wagged the fingers of her right hand in a little wave.

Mesmerized, Seneca waved back. It was an awkward exchange, the kind little girls do when they meet for the first time and wonder if they will be friends.

Sandrine swung her legs over the bench seat, picked up her daughter's drawing, and strode across the distance to Seneca, who was now trembling, wondering what to think of her neighbor's presence after all the searches. All the stories. All the public outcry. What did one say to a neighbor one had never met, who'd been 'missing' for two months but was right here in her own backyard, playing with her daughter, as if it were just another ordinary day?

Sandrine halted several feet short of where Seneca stood. The two women took each other's measure for a moment, eyes searching eyes.

Then Sandrine said, "You can see me, then."

Seneca fainted.

When her eyes fluttered open, she was looking at the dusky sky over her porch. Why? What was she doing down here? She rubbed her eyes, noted a throbbing in the back of her head, and tried to remember.... then shot up, heart racing..... and looked straight at Sandrine, seated at the garden table.

"Its too many long nights at the hospital."

"I'm actually here. You're not crazy," Sandrine said gently. "I have no idea why, but you seem to be the only one besides my daughter who can see me. And hear me, I suppose," Sandrine sighed. Then she frowned, slightly. "I'm dead, aren't I?"

"Are you?" Seneca asked, hesitantly.

"Its the only explanation," Sandrine said, matter-of-factly.

"For what?" Seneca half-croaked.

Sandrine sat forward, an earnest look on her face. "Your name is Seneca, right? I need your help. I'm dead, I don't know how or why or what I'm still doing here, but my daughter keeps drawing these," she held out the little girl's paper, where something resembling a rainbow in at least thirteen colors floated in the middle of the page.

Seneca looked at the drawing, then up at the face of her dead neighbor, who was watching her intently. Sandrine said, "Shelbi doesn't realize I'm dead. Something happened, and I think she was there, but me being here is confusing her." Sandrine's eyes pleaded as she leaned closer. "My baby needs help. I need help." A pause. "Will you help us?"

