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Not One to Blame

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Author Bio

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Not One to Blame

BEATRICE SLEVIN-TRIGO

Silas started it.

That's all anyone needs to know. Silas started it. Mister Garner's lush Victorian-era garden was now steeped in an inch of water. The verdant summer grasses were brown with mud. The lawnmower gurgled and pattered electrically at the edge of the backyard, and the roses that his wife planted ten years ago—bless her soul—were now ruined and would never rise again from their watery grave. We were suddenly thankful that Miss Garner hadn't been buried in the backyard, but we knew very little about my neighbor, so who were we to assume that he didn't dump his wife under his beloved topsoil like he did with his little dog? Sparky's grave was probably water-logged too—although we weren't inclined to bless his soul, because he bit Mary's ankles a year ago and she had to get stitches for it.

My neighbor's garden was flooded. And Silas still held the hose with a manic grin on his face, as if he had always wanted to do it and only now found the balls to. Mary stood beside him, dumbfounded, frozen. We were only meant to take care of my neighbor's garden for a week. I left Silas alone for one moment, and he broke everything. Garner was coming back this evening—we were going to be killed.

Mary clapped her hands over her mouth as if the totality of the situation just struck her. "It's your fault," her voice spluttered from behind her fingers, like a muffled radio.

"He had it coming anyway," came Silas's proud reply.

He squinted at the lace-covered windows as if to challenge them. Garner was my next door neighbor, a quiet, half-blind old man that couldn't be more than sixty. Silas, who was anything but quiet, blind only in thought, and no older than a fool, lived straight across from him, and swore up and down that the old man's milky eyes were fixed on him at all hours of the day. Garner stares all day out that window, Silas said with a sneer. Staring at me, he insisted. I never took it seriously because Garner could barely see two feet in front of him. I thought Silas was only feigning his hatred, just to be funny, just to pretend that he had some sort of rivalry going on to make his life interesting. Garner never even said anything

to merit it—in fact, the first time he talked directly to us at all was to ask us to tend to his beloved garden while he visited his grandchildren. His voice creaked and rasped as though it had not been used in years, like a century-old drawer unlocked for the first time. I was eager to close it, to stop that grating noise and pick up an easy job for all of us. Now I wished I hadn't. Garner's only hobby was that garden. Probably his only friend, too. It would take months, years even, to get it back to the way it was before his wife died.

I lunged for the spigot at the side of the garden and twisted it until the running water stopped. Silas scoffed and threw down the hose, and it bubbled underneath the water. I had half a mind to hit him—I started to shake uncontrollably as I considered holding his face below the inch-tall flood until he stopped gurgling—but as he threw up his hands and stepped to the side, I pretended he had an ounce of remorse in his empty head. I always had to pretend with him, even back when we all were little kids growing up on the same block—now that we've started high school, nothing's changed. At times I wondered if the only reason I let him come by was because I pretended to enjoy his company. One could certainly pretend that his jokes were funny, but I never could tell when he wasn't telling one.

And I couldn't pretend with Mary, unless it was to pretend that she wasn't there, which she always was. She chewed at her fingernails as she walked around the perimeter of the yard, every step a painfully audible slosh. We would have to either steal buckets and dump the water out or dig a gutter through the front yard to guide the flood to the road. Either way, we weren't getting paid. And we all knew each one of our households well enough to know that the grief wouldn't stop at our wallets. At one point or another, neighbors and family friends became family ties, Garner included. To our parents, this would be the moral equivalent of pouring bleach into grandpa's tea. Mary would get her phone taken away for sure—her folks were too high strung, too proud, to let this kind of thing slide. I'd never be able to look Garner in the eye again—not out of shame, but because my parents were going to snap my neck when they got back from grocery shopping. And Silas... would probably be fine. A slap on the wrist, perhaps, but not nearly enough to choke him out of his habits. His parents were either simply too forgiving or simply didn't care.

I pressed my palms against my eyelids to block out the sight in front of me. I wished that I could have blocked out my ears too, because Mary started to mutter nervously under her breath. That's all she did, twisting at her ponytail and mumbling as she paced around like she was about to be put into a straitjacket. It started to get on my nerves, and I removed

my hands from my face. Silas stood beside me with his own hands in the pockets of his khakis, observing the destroyed garden just as calmly as if he were standing on the beach and watching the waves roll. Underneath his sharp nose, he smiled like he was running a campaign—somewhere deep in the recesses of his cavernous mind, he was trying to spin an excuse. For himself, of course. Why would he ever think of us?

I couldn't stand it. I stormed away from the backyard to sit on the sidewalk. Silas followed and called after me, but the moment he saw Max walking on the opposite side of the street, he shut up and ducked away from view. Anyone would have recognized that blonde mop, that kickable, twelve-year-old nag that lived at the edge of the neighborhood. But Max didn't recognize me as he ambled down the street. I watched his bandaged knees bounce as he walked, the way his hands swung at his sides. His grubby fingers were curled around a fistful of crabapples. He made his way into the backyard of a house that was not his, and after a few silent moments, the pained screech of a cat rang out. Max emerged again, wild and laughing, hands empty—and ran all the way back to his own house, chased by the pissed-off tabby that he had tortured for the third time this week.

As far as I knew, nobody liked that kid. He ran over everyone's feet on his bicycle. His parents definitely had a separate account to pay for every glass he's broken. I would have wagered that he knew how to destroy everything he touched, right down to the concrete foundations of his ivy-dappled house with the duct-taped windows.

In fact, I knew that he was capable of destruction.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mary emerge from the backyard, soaked up to her ankles, and I knew she could tell what I meant to do the moment I stood up and stumbled across the road. She opened her mouth to protest, but promptly closed it as I rummaged through Max's front yard. Silas, bless his stupid head, only caught on when I dragged Max's green-and-black bicycle through the street, all the way to Garner's house, and dumped it just beside the unraveled hose. Silas grinned, and his eyes and nose scrunched in impish appreciation.

My hands shook as I placed the evidence that would absolve us. Max deserved it, I had to tell myself. We didn't. Max still had a future, and his parents didn't care. Or maybe they did, even if they turned a blind eye. Perhaps this would be the final straw for him. Suddenly, I wondered if he acted out for their attention—or to release the stress of living with them at all. I never considered why he did the things he did. I barely even stopped to consider why I was saving Silas's skin once again, even though I could have easily thrown him under the bus. Every time I thought about leaving

him to fend for himself, I was sure he'd wriggle out like some sick sort of fish, floundering until someone else caught him and threw him back. Why was I the one who had to reel him in? There was no place for me to act higher than him. I was no better than he was.

Mary put a comforting hand on my shoulder as I stepped back. I pretended that I was doing it for her neck instead of his; I pretended like I was still a good person. Silas, as always, didn't seem to care for what would happen at all. He put his hands on his hips and nodded approvingly as he looked around, and then gave the bike a little kick. My stomach lurched, and my face flushed—I never hated him more. Yes, I hated him, that was it. Hated how he wormed his way out, and hated how he burrowed his way back in. Hated how he roped us in to build himself scapegoats and excuses, hated how he never apologized for anything in his life. Hated that he never seemed to consider the penalties, and hated how Mary enabled him in her silent way and let him do whatever he pleased. I think I hated her too, by association—but I had only enough space between my teeth to grind Silas's image to dust, and bite down on my own tongue for long enough to guarantee that one day, he'd know exactly how malicious of a person he was, and how cowardly of a person he made me.

Within the hour, we heard Garner's car rumbling down the street. The moment he stepped out, his grey hairs thin and his grey eyes wide, we thought he'd go into shock, or at least disintegrate into dust. We were good actors, we really were—we had to be, to be Silas's friends. We put our whole hearts into acting confused and outraged, as if we had just arrived at this mess too. But my outrage was real, because the moment he spotted the half-submerged bike, Garner immediately started towards Max's house without another word, and Silas smiled.