A Call on Bailey Road

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When the sirens turn off you can hear a cat howling from somewhere in the woods. You don’t realize it now, but the sound is something that will stay with you for the rest of your life. The flashers on top of the fire truck are still running, splashing red light over the white walls of the house in front of you. The wind is cold coming across the fields, but inside your suit you are sweating as you run from the truck to the front steps.

You open the door and make one heavy step inside. You can feel your stomach rise into your throat as you move the rest of your body through the doorframe. She is lying face up on her kitchen floor. The pool of blood spreading from her head is the size of a dining room table. Then you see her son on his knees beside her. His small hands are wiping blood from her face with the corner of his t-shirt. You look down and notice a cordless phone at your feet smudged red with tiny fingerprints.

Your fire suit feels heavier than it should as you run for the boy, scooping him into your arms. You run with him into a bedroom and close the door, sitting him in a desk chair. Red flashers pour in through the window. Outside you can hear Pro Med carry the gurney through the front door of the house. You cross the room to turn on the light and notice briefly the noise the wheels make as they move across the floor—sticky. When you turn around he is staring right at you. The bottom half of his shirt is covered in blood and so are his socks. The knees of his pants are dark with red circles. He reminds you of your own son, who is sleeping safe in his own bed tonight. You move closer and kneel beside him. You can smell the blood on his clothes.
You ask him what his name is and his reply is so soft you have to read his lips to understand. His name is Danny and he is six and a half years old. A full three years older than your own son, but every time you look at Danny they seem more alike. You try to ask him about school and what his favorite TV shows are, but he doesn’t answer. So you tell him about your son, because Anthony is the only thing that you can think of right now. Danny seems to like this. He even laughs a little when you tell him about the picture of a dinosaur that Anthony scribbled for you on the wall in the hallway last week. You still haven’t scrubbed it clean.

The chief comes into the room and tells you that the grandmother is here to take the boy. You can hear her crying outside. Before you say goodbye to Danny you place a hand on his shoulder and tell him that he was brave. You rise to your feet and move toward the door, but as you are walking through he calls out to you. When you turn around he is off the chair and pulling a hand from his pocket. He holds his hand out to you and this gesture makes him look older. As if he is growing up right in front of you. In the center of his small white palm rests two silver bullet shells. He tells you that he found them on the floor next to his mom.

You take the shells and tell him he did a good job, all the while knowing that it is not what he needs to hear right now. That you cannot tell him the things he needs to hear right now. On your way out of the house you find a police officer and hand him the bullet shells. There are maybe thirty people outside now, but you have never felt more alone in your life. The flashers on top of the fire truck are still spilling light over the house and across the yard. Somewhere out in the woods you hear the cat, still howling.

— Joelee Dekker