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Replaced

by Mia Sundby

Overnight, our neighbours began to look at us differently. I'm sorry, that makes it sound sudden. It was, in a way, in that, I mean, well, it happened overnight, but it wasn't, well... Obvious. Not suddenly, anyway.

It was small things at first; Carol down the road forgot my name as I walked past with Rufus, our eight year old dachshund. She was stood in her drive, letters strewn at her feet, looking off into the empty road. I slowed, obviously, and turned to offer a concerned but friendly smile.

"You alright, Carol?"

She had stared at me, blankly, for a long moment. Long enough that I became uncomfortable. My eyes darted to the letters at her feet. Carol was a woman of indeterminable elderliness --through a combination of luridly modern clothes, a brassy voice, and old-fashioned garden furniture it was often difficult to place her age. Though I was sure that was helped by the plastic surgery she pretended she'd never had. I liked Carol. She had a tendency to monopolise the neighbourhood watch meetings, but it was always with the best intentions. Street parties, the kids being allowed more time out to play along the quiet road, barbecues 'round hers, pulling together to run groceries to and from old Bill's when he broke his leg. Sam and I had had her round ours several times throughout our year of living on Dacqueray Road. She was nice. She was loud. She was animated.

Except for today.

I stared at the letters, then back at her. "Any good news?" I asked, my smile weakening.

Finally, she blinked. Her brows furrowed as she looked at me. "Sorry, Dana. I can't speak with you." Then she turned around, winding through her over-stuffed garden of gnomes and flamingos, and shut the front door behind her. From my feet, Rufus whined. He had sounded as confused as I had felt.

My name is Delilah. She knows my name is Delilah. Her great aunt was called Delilah --she had told me when we first met.

Rufus was tugging on the lead, so I allowed him to drag me away and back onto our regular route. As I looked back at the house, I saw a figure standing in the upstairs window, looking out into Dacqueray Road. My breathing stopped, and my feet slowed. Rufus yelped as I stepped on his toe. With a yelp of my own, I crouched down to apologise and inspect his paw, stroking his tiny head. By the time I had looked back --having convinced Rufus that he wasn't dying-- the figure was gone.

And yes, I appreciate that as I'm saying this now, it sounds obvious that something was wrong. But, well, Carol was getting on and I didn't know what her health was like --though she always seemed in good spirits and only ever grimly muttered about her trick knee and a recurring tennis elbow-- I thought maybe her memory was beginning to fail her. It fails us all sooner or later, after all.

I didn't think she'd been *replaced*. Why would I?