

Her Suburbia

A short story collection by Anna Avent

## Her Bedroom



Her bedroom is laid out as if it's a natural history museum. On the wall to the right of your entrance is a plethora of disposable camera pictures taped on the wall, some fallen, leaving holes of white and patches of colorful photos on the floor below. To the left is a mirror covered in various stickers; the stickers are perfectly placed so that if you stand directly in front, you are unable to see your face. At the back of the room is a bookshelf; half contains books, and the other half has various "collectibles", 'crystals, scary baby dolls from the thrift, CDs, plants, and jewelry. Finally, at the center of the room stands a bed, currently unmade and like the bookshelf halfway full of junk - half-eaten food, too many pillows, a lighter, hair elastics, crumbs, and of course, her. She scrolls through her phone nonchalantly, swiping past pictures of people she knows and others she doesn't. One photo she stops on is of a girl she used to go to school with. The girl is a year older than her, and she thinks prettier than the last time she actually saw her. In the photo, the girl poses in front of a building covered in ivy, her hand placed delicately at her sides, shoulders back, looking to the right.

She zooms in on the photo, specifically on the girl's face, her jawline, examining its shape, then reaching her hand to her chin to trace her own. She opens the girl's page to notice her bio, stating where she now lives, along with a quote from a novel, the quote commenting on how kindness is needed forever and always. She continues down the page, tapping on group pictures, examining the people the girl tends to hang out with, and seeing if anyone resembles her. The photos span years, the girl's first post being February 11th, 2011, to her most recent being three days ago, January 12th, 2023. A post on June 20th, 2017, shows the girl posing next to a plaque hung on what she assumes is her bedroom wall. The plaque recognizes the girl for her performance in a short film she had been involved in, with the words "BEST PERFORMANCE" engraved at the top. She shuts her phone off with an audible click ringing out of the speaker and gets up to sit in front of her mirror. She stares at her face for a second, first noticing the obvious things that appear, two eyes, two eyebrows, one nose, and a pair of lips. She starts with her eyes, examining their color and determining whether the color is OK or too muddy to determine. Then to her nose, she takes her finger and drags it down the bridge stopping at the tip and then noticing her nostrils. Her nostrils face up, almost parallel with her face, exposing every hair and minuscule crust that lies inside. She skips over her lips and takes a long pause at her chin. She inspects it from three angles: the front, the right, and the left. She then stands, making her way back to her bed, sits down, and positions herself upright, shoulders back. She opens her camera app and inspects various angles, ultimately landing on placing her face to the right. She takes numerous pictures, then looks at the abundance in her camera roll. As she studies the pictures, she mindfully considers the criteria of what must lie in each image. Face turned to the right, chin up, mouth slightly open, hand covering the jawline. She finds a photo that satisfies her criteria and posts it. As it waits to be inspected on the screens of other people, she studies it again herself, making sure she is content with what she sees. As time passes, she continually refreshes the screen. She sees a comment from someone she knows; it makes her smile. After 15 mins of refreshing and taking in the likes that are accumulating, she gets a notification from the girl, a like. As she clicks the notification, it brings her to her picture. She looks at it closely again before clicking on the girl's name and proceeding to her page yet again. She returns to the photo of the ivy wall and scrolls through the comments. She moves on to the picture with the plaque, observing it again, scrolling through who liked and commented. She gets up and moves to the mirror, not sitting this time. She feels a pain in her chest that escapes in a recognizable cry. She keeps her head down,

feeling the streaks of water collect at her chin, and then fall to her feet. As the crying subsides, she raises her head. When she looks forward, she sees the mirror and its collections of stickers blocking her face. The face that could not be critiqued any longer.

#### Her Mother



A leather-bound photo album sits on her lap, sprawled open, unveiling memories of a past she never experienced. She flips through the plastic pages as if they're a living entity, delicately using her left hand to lift a corner, carry it over, and reveal the next side, careful not to disturb the people encased in the images. On the next page is a collection of images of her mother as a young girl, from toddler to teenager. One photo shows her mother and uncle standing in front of a blue Cadillac DeVille, her young mother with pigtails in her hair, arms crossed, and mouth open, as if she was in the middle of saying something. She ponders on the images and asks herself a few questions, "What was she saying? What did her voice sound like? Was it similar to mine? Did she throw a tantrum while getting those pigtails, like I always did?". The next photo seems to be her mother

at the same age as the previous, this time at the pool, still in pigtails. As she skims the page, she begins to realize that in every photo, her mother is wearing pigtails, except for one. The only photo that doesn't show her mother in pigtails sits in the bottom right corner of the page. She wonders if this was intentional, if her grandmother decided this specific image didn't need the center slots as much as the pigtail pictures did. The corner picture shows her mother in a pale yellow dress with puffed sleeves, sitting in a velvet armchair with a look of concern. She examines the photo more thoroughly, noting the matching yellow bow, accentuating the already evident southern ambiance of the image. She notes the somewhat humorous feeling this image evokes, how that sweet, innocent little girl is the same woman who provided her with her very life. The photos in the pages following display a girl the same age as her, her mother as a teenager. These pages are not lingered on; they scare her in a way. "What would she have thought of me?" the detrimental question. As she skims through the rest of the book that weighs down on her thighs, she ultimately returns to the yellow dress picture. She carefully slides the photo out of its plastic lining, again making sure not to disturb the little girl in her delicate state. She drags a finger across the edge of the photo, almost as if circling the photo in full will allow her to reach in and join her, sit next to her, and ask, "Do you know what lies ahead?". As her finger wraps around the final corner, she feels a sharp sting on her fingertip, a line of blood now indicating where the photo engraved itself. She puts the wound to her mouth, sucking until the metal taste dissipates from her tongue. She looks back to the picture to see a small red circle sitting next to her young mother's small head. The red circle grows as it seeps into the fibers of the image until at once her mother's face is encased in auburn. The DNA from her future daughter seeped into the crevices of her wholesome face.