

# Two Studies in Entropy

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To Rae-Jean's face, people said things like, "Ohmygod, thank god you're alive," or "Ohmygod, it's a miracle," or "Ohmygod, just think: *What if* you'd forgotten something? *What if* you'd gone back inside?"

*What if*. . . Always, *What if*. . .

People would say something gruesomely speculative like that, prefaced with *What if*, and then they'd shudder and grimace in that horrible way that is almost a smile—that bizarre expression that grips people when they're relating details of life-threatening events. An expression that made Rae-Jean think of Munch's "The Scream"—the same soul-sucking posture and the same face-gripping gasp of abomination—but with a big, happy smile like Curious George.

Behind Rae-Jean's back, the same people said to each other: "Jesus, what a nincompoop!" "How stupid can a person be?" "Didn't she read the damn directions? For chrissake, there's a big friggin' warning on the label!" and "It's a wonder she didn't blow us all off the face of the earth!"

It was a miracle. It was a true miracle that no one had been killed or maimed or even slightly injured. There was

a bus stop just across the street, at the corner of Callen and Mississippi, and only moments before the blast, three junior high school boys stood there smoking cigarettes, punching each other in the chest, and jumping up to slap and bend the street sign. A few minutes before that, Renata Creech stood in the same spot, waiting for the Mountain Line bus.

Kids called Rae-Jean “Bombs Away Baker” and “The Flea Bomber.” “Here comes (or there goes) The Flea Bomber,” they’d call out every time she passed by.

Rae-Jean heard them, too. She heard them all right. They meant her to hear them. She’d never be able to live it down.

Rae-Jean was the woman who set off eighteen flea bombs in her house at 8:30 a.m. on the morning of August 27, 2002, before going to work. She was about eight blocks away, heading up Dorsey Avenue with Alice James and Ralph Waldo Emerson in the back seat, heading up to the kennel where Alice and R.W. had reservations to spend the day while the house fumigated itself. The explosion—detonated by the tiny pilot light in the furnace, no bigger than the flame of a Bic lighter—literally blew Rae-Jean’s bungalow to smithereens. The windows exploded, and the front and back doors were ripped off their hinges and hurled into the alley and street. Rae-Jean’s dining room wall with its built-in corner cupboard displaying her collection of carnival glass, slammed through the next-door neighbor’s garage. A shrapnel cocktail of glass shards, nails, and little pieces of plaster shot up high into the air like fireworks.

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