

The First Two Pages of “Good Neighbors,” by Victoria Kazarian
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An Essay by Victoria Kazarian

In Silicon Valley where I live—the epicenter of the COVID pandemic 18 months ago—housing prices are rising like crazy.

It doesn't matter that tech companies have let their employees work at home, so they can work online from Cabo San Lucas if they want to. People still want to live here. They're willing to bid way over the asking price for small, ranch-style homes and to spend up to two hours a day commuting on the freeways and expressways that snake across the valley.

My short story in *The Fish that Got Away*, “Good Neighbors,” is about a young woman who has just had her first child. Emily Carter and her husband, both of them Silicon Valley tech professionals, have decided that she will make the ultimate sacrifice to stay home with their child. So Em steps off the treadmill of the high-tech work life, leaving the world of to-do lists and software marketing campaigns to breastfeed, change diapers and take her baby on walks around her new neighborhood.

At the beginning of the story, we meet Em right after she's made this transition:

She wedged her 48-ounce water bottle into the slot on the broad plastic inset, on a [stroller] handle that resembled a big dashboard,

with a place for everything. Toys, keys, phone. She was piloting the equivalent of a stroller SUV.

As they rumbled down the walkway to the street, she glanced wistfully at her sleek gray

Lexus coupe in the driveway, with its bumper sticker for her recent product marketing launch. *LegiPro Platinum. There's no substitute.*

Of course, it wasn't her job anymore. The new product was now Melissa's baby, so to speak.

In her hazy, postpartum state, Em feels out of whack, vulnerable. She was used to being important at work—seriously, people *reported* to her. On her walks with her baby, she waits for her replacement at work to call, asking for her expertise and telling her about the success of the marketing campaign Em so carefully crafted before her maternity leave.

Now she is home, watching the world pass her by. She misses having a schedule and being productive in a quantifiable way. She desperately misses people—so much that it impairs her judgment.

In some of my favorite stories, characters and conflict grow out of the setting. I found this easy to do with Silicon Valley.

Silicon Valley is a pressure cooker, a place where really smart people work long hours. They make sacrifices. Despite the myth that multi-tasking is possible, many people doing it will admit it isn't sustainable. Eventually something has to give—whether it's a marriage, friendships, sleep, or the prospect of having children.

People have to make difficult choices in the valley, which raises the stakes and makes for great story conflict.

Wanting to give their child the best schools and neighborhood, Em and her husband have just purchased a home at the edge of the western hills. The more success someone achieves in the valley, the higher they tend to move up the hills, hoping to escape the stress of the valley in their lovely home, while retaining a view of the place that gave them the stress in the first place. Purchasing a home like this chains you more securely to the Silicon Valley treadmill; you've got to keep paying the bills.

Stress is inherent in valley life—and it's addictive. Em has made her sacrifice, but she misses the regular shots of adrenaline. She misses actually completing tasks. She even misses working with Rick, the flaky CEO she reported to. When her replacement calls, it makes Em feel good to be asked for advice:

“I told you—make friends with Rick's assistant, Karla. Bring her a caramel macchiato from the cafeteria. She'll get you on his schedule.”

Ethan's whine built up to a shaky, vibrato wail.

With a rushed goodbye to Melissa, Em took the brake off and looked around at her options. No convenient place to nurse. Ethan would have to hold out for a few more minutes.

At home, she parked and unstrapped Ethan. His crying lapsed into shudders as he felt the comfort of her arms. She unlocked the door and headed for the couch.

As soon she picked him up to nurse, he turned his head toward her, his mouth opening and closing like a goldfish, until he connected with his mid-morning meal. Em leaned back and waited for a satisfying dose of hormonal motherhood to kick in. Sometimes it

came—a deep, settled rightness. Other times she felt like a cow hooked to a milking machine.

By quitting her job, Em Carter has stepped into a new world. In a sense, this is a page out of the Hero's Journey, which I teach to my high-school freshmen every year. I absolutely love this arc, and I've always wanted to use it in a mystery story. Em has left the ordinary world and crossed the threshold into the extraordinary world of motherhood. Everything is unfamiliar here. Even her marriage is different now. Instead of relying on her wits and experience, she has to listen to her body, her instincts—while being overwhelmed with hormonal surges and her body's constant need to feed her child.

She's learning to use her new powers, just as Bilbo learned to use the power of the ring in *The Hobbit*. In this weird, in-between place, she feels very vulnerable. She used to feel confident in her abilities. Now she doubts herself.

At the helm of her massive super stroller, Em rumbles down the street to meet the neighbors in her new neighborhood. She has found a very un-Gandalf-like mentor, the snoopy Mrs. Derosio, who gives her the lowdown on the neighbors:

Mrs. D had *opinions*. The Saldanas across the street shouldn't have given their middle schooler a cell phone. The newly single man down the street with the roses was sad and needed to talk to someone. The Lews on the corner were putting in cheap new carpet and would sell their house soon, *mark my words*.

Today as they neared Mrs. Derosio's grey split level, Em felt herself perk up, happy at the chance for conversation. Maybe a little gossip.

When she's thrown into a terrifying situation in this new neighborhood, Em will need to use her new powers to save her child.

I had a lot of fun weaving this story from the setting of Silicon Valley. I've never understood why stories and movies about the valley mostly focus on the technology or the intrigue of tech secrets. To me—a non-techie married to a software engineer—the people are more interesting. What do people give up in order to live here? How do they cope with the stress? Why are they willing to spend \$2 million on a two-bedroom ranch-style home?

The people here are as complex as the technology and much more nuanced. With their intelligence, drive, and varied reasons for being here, they'll give me material for years to come.

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Victoria Kazarian lives and writes in San Jose, California. A former Silicon Valley marketing professional, she is the mom of three mostly grown children and teaches high school English and creative writing. She has a soft spot in her heart for stray guitars. In April 2021, she released her first novel, *Swift Horses Racing*. You can find out more about Victoria and her writing at victoriakazarian.com.