Life from Afar

Stephen Schottenfeld

Begin with the book. Open it. My hands can't grip but the page turns anyway. Sound of paper flipping. Column of names. Spotlight one: Gina Rioux. Stop there. Finger-point the target. Destination: Gina. Meet the creator behind all this. I might be her creation, but I'll control my whereabouts.

The neighborhood directory tucks easy in back pocket.

Departure. Adventure. Explore expanding environment. I glide down the sidewalk. No feel of the pavement, but I hear footfalls, so I must be walking well.

Serene birdsong. Surrounding chirps. Tilt upward to canopy of greenery. The line of trees repeating. Seeds helicopter down.

A man bent forward, about to fall over? Correction: posture signals yardwork concentration. He pulls at a problem area and the weed releases. I stare at the root, and a thought-ellipsis hovers in the air above my head, poised to become words, but I'm staying speechless. My first communication will be with her.

Audible commotion inside subsequent house. Multiple voices, then an interior door slam. High up, ellipsis trails out of the chimney, but I'll skip that message too. Distress signal? Decipher later. I accelerate past noise, my speed value increasing.

House numbers ascending – sequence of evens on one side, odds on the other – and my target is 57. If numbering system stays consistent, not far to travel.

A child runs across the yard, alongside me. Next a toddler with a stumble-walk. To my left and right, a multitude of families: classification of neighborhood as optimal family area.

Wind activates grass blades. Rev of leaf blower. And a chainsaw – another ash tree coming down? Wait, why would I, the player character, know tree species?

Lawn sign posted: Pesticide Application Do Not Enter. I keep clear of the treatment.

SOLD, says a house listing.

Another family, eerily similar to previous one. Respawning? No time to puzzle identities and duplication. Number 57. Arrival. Her establishment. I guess not hers; only half of it. Just upper level. Plain house. A-frame structure, two stories. I was expecting scary, but no apprehension. A doorway unbarricaded. I push forward and the door opens. Discover a bigger task and hindrance: a staircase. Can't go around,

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which means I'm climbing. Acute challenge. Up up the flight of stairs. Knees functional. Reached the top. I feel unlimited in my motions. Accomplishment – I should be rewarded. Be sure to ask about scoring system. Glimpse the light beneath. No peephole on door but sounds of typing within. Ready for my encounter.

My hand raises for a polite knock but the door creaks open automatically. Surprised at nonfortification. I cross the threshold and step into a cramped, angled room. Straight ahead, at the far end, with her back to me, at her desk. This whole room must be her office. Feels more like a cave. (Do I get to be caver?) Midday, I think, but she's still in pajamas. She swivels from her chair. And glares. Face bright in desklight.

ME: It's me.

Her look is total frustration.

GINA: Ugh. Interruption. You must be lost.

Dilemma – leave? Retreat behind entry point? No: hold position.

GINA: You appear to be trespassing.

I stay idle while she rises and approaches. I see her squint, recognize. Eyes widening in astonishment.

GINA: Oh, it's *you*.

She extends her arm, holds out her hand, then beckons with a wiggling finger.

GINA: Follow me.

Ignore command? Being lured to instant death? Tilt down to hardwood. False floor? Spike trap? View entire grid for suspicious edges or thicknesses. Step forward with care. Still wary of, say, bottomless pit. What's been overlooked? Some nameless peril. Pan walls for potential flying weapon.

She returns to her chair. I see a second one nearby – a recliner. She converts it upright, and I proceed to it with extreme caution, fearing a steep drop, or even electrification, but nothing. Clear path navigated. The room doesn't tumble into deep chasm but holds.

I rotate, back in and sit. Accommodates me perfectly, as if made for my exact specifications, although I can't confirm material is soft.

GINA: I don't think you need a back pillow.

Did she just read my thoughts? Is secrecy possible?

On her desk, twin monitors. On the right, indecipherable data structure, lines of varying syntax and tints. On the left, rendering of living room. Cluster of man, woman, child. I glance at the youngest character – childhood is focal point? What's developing between them? Preview of future realm to enter? A keyboard sounds; the image minimizes.

ME: Oh.

GINA: Technical stuff. Who needs distractions.

Distractions everywhere. Creatures on windowsill. Stuffed giraffe on desk. The coffee mug says "Computer Genius." Her silk-screened T-shirt reads "Neighbor-

hood Watch," the words above a silhouetted figure seated on a stone pillar, viewing a tight circle of houses.

GINA: Game nerd paraphernalia.

She points to the windowsill.

GINA: I'm hoping they become collectibles.

I look at her. We face each other. The orientation feels significant.

GINA: So. You found me. We've made contact.

ME: The handbook told me where to go.

GINA: Not a very good hiding place, then.

ME: I wanted to come see you directly.

GINA: Such initiative.

ME: I wasn't sure I'd find you here.

GINA: Where else? And now you've pulled back the curtain. How would you rate your experiences so far? Did you notice the ginkgo tree?

Helicopter seeds . . . Chainsaws . . .

ME: I didn't see –

GINA: Pay attention. Sharpen your eyes.

ME: Sorry.

GINA: No, *I'm* sorry. I need to do a better job of leading your eyes to it.

She points to a glass of water on the table.

GINA: Drink? You must be parched.

Poison? Tranquilizer? I take a risk and raise the glass. Dilution of what? Clear solution only intensifies fear of hidden potion. Tilt in a tentative sip. Sound of glug and swallow. Mistake? I wait for bad outcome. Deadly effect – immediate or delayed? Nothing, except maybe trust established. She smiles and nods, as if I understood meaning. Glass is lowered without spilling. Correction: glass is *out of water*, but I don't think I drank full contents. Did liquid slide in automatically or perhaps just evaporate at lips?

GINA: Such thirst! Hydrated but you didn't drown. And you didn't spring a leak. Watertight. And no hiccups either. The capacity! Now, I'd love to see how food enters your mouth.

Magically, on a plate, on a folding table, materialization of cookies. A trick? When was preparation? Ask about spell casting.

GINA: Look what I've whipped up. May I tempt you? Trust me, they're sweet. Irresistible.

What's my tactic here? No reward for drinking water – except cookies? What am I earning?

GINA: Imitation ingredients – forever shelf life – so they might taste artificial. Bit crisp. I'm afraid I don't know how to make something soft.

Odd enticement.

GINA: No nibble? I admire your self-control. Perhaps you only prefer *real* food. Me, I could just *live* on these. Where's my willpower? Here, watch my weakness.

She crams a cookie into her mouth. She chews, swallows, then grins with her mouth closed. Suddenly, convulsion: she shakes, and my panic – I have to save her! It's critical to keep her alive. *This* is the test? She stops moving. Death? Paralysis? Where is health kit?

But then she smiles.

GINA: False alarm. What a faker. Would it have been better if I turned green? Anyway, I think the recipe didn't come together. They *look* delicious, but something's off with the flavor. Like a mock-cookie.

ME: I talked to someone. Or *she* talked. The head of the neighborhood association, or something like that.

She looks at the right monitor and squints her eyes, as if to locate some entity living in the scripting language.

GINA: Yes, her.

ME: I was told not to come here.

GINA: Ah, you've been forewarned. Isn't she silly? Thinks she's on another level. She likes to patrol the neighborhood, under the guise of hospitality. Some people are just unreal.

ME: She explained the game.

GINA: She did, did she? I'd love to hear her mindless theory.

ME: She said I go into neighbors' houses. I observe them.

GINA: Yes. Undercover work.

ME: And then I inform her of troublesome behavior.

GINA: *Her*?

ME: She thinks you're dangerous.

GINA: Such theatrics.

ME: Why is she involved in your game?

She glances again at the blueprints – is this pretending or is there really an error? – then back to me.

GINA: I'm afraid she can't be disabled. She is what I would call a persistent object. We'll work around her. I'm glad you brought her up. A mere blip on the radar.

ME: Is she working against you?

GINA: We are not in agreement. Whereas, you and I, we read each other's thoughts. A secret understanding. You have no reason to fear me, whereas *her* – I'd take precautions.

ME: She brought me cookies. Like yours.

GINA: INFILTRATOR!

Flash of anger as she flings plate off the table where it hits the floor and shatters.

Take cover? Evacuation – is window my second exit? Why can't I pull an escape lever?

Her enraged face is the frightful contraption I feared in the floor. I'd scream if I could. Hinges of her mouth open terrifyingly wide, as if she herself is prison chamber. She slams the table. The desk lamp shakes and strobes her face in a vibrating glow.

GINA: **I WILL NOT BE SABOTAGED!**

Her face reddens and her fists raise. This is not fake convulsion, her emotions are real, and the abrupt eruption – rush of blood on skin – rattles me. Continued depiction of her volcanic fury, but then, with a deep breath, her outburst ends, the redness fades.

GINA: Yeesh. Gotta work on my breaking point. That was irrational.

Her voice modulates down.

GINA: I am myself again. Composure is restored. Demeanor and breathing regulated. Temperature: cool. Stabilized. Once again human. A simple reset.

She twists her wrist as if adjusting a knob.

I'm unconvinced by her tight smile, by her mechanical assurance of equilibrium. If she attacked the plate, what might she do to me? Her cavernous mouth – I still see dungeon.

GINA: Delicate subject, her. The game: it is under control and it has not been compromised. I don't know why I take things so personally.

Also, low coping skills.

Most worrisome for me: my reaction time was slow. Brain processed nothing when plate flew past. Need to increase sensitivity. Ask about augmentation? I want to be adept at this. Improve quickness. Improve reflex dexterity. Terrible performance in emergency. I didn't jump or scatter to safety, much less throw toxic cloud, which maybe I don't even have. I only sat, stunned. What might this mean for future assaults? I'd be so easily killed. I can't imagine the points I'll lose. Infinite damage. Gaze down at broken plate. Is penalty waived if I pick up pieces? Gain points by repairing? Then again, I don't see a health bar ticking down to zero.

GINA: She and I, I would classify our relationship as strained. Picture a tug of war.

Her hands push and pull at the air between them.

ME: Is she working against *me*? I'm confused about the game. What am I doing? What's my goal? Fun, I'd imagine.

GINA: Incorrect. You have imagined wrong! I mean, fun is not a sufficient metric. I didn't make a toy. We're beyond amusement. We're not just bouncing around. Have I cleared things up for you? You get the gist.

No. Still uninformed.

ME: I wasn't sure if I should violate people's privacy.

GINA: Actually, I'd encourage that. These neighbors. They need our help. They're suffering. True, sometimes they're suffering because of me – the situation I've put them in – a bit of a double bind. Believe me, you wouldn't wish to be them. Still,

they make me sad. Let's help them grow, evolve. They have such possibilities. They aren't all alike, and yet they've gone characterless. Facsimiles, really.

ME: So, I'm offering aid.

GINA: You're offering understanding. Of their potentialities. Listen to their sorrows. Pry into their humanity. Be the neighborhood conscience and find out what's gone wrong with them. Speaking of, do I look funny? It's weird making me. What's your impression of my appearance? Does anything seem different?

ME: I've never seen you before.

GINA: Ha – you don't know the original. I'm entirely disguised! No, only a slightly better shape. Less slack in the midsection. Disappeared is the double chin. Those cookies – believe me, if you were me, I mean, if *I* were me – I would have wolfed them down.

Cookies now a mess on floor. Is cleanup my task?

GINA: Full confession: I've done a little work to the face. Captured myself in a flattering light. A modest makeover, but I have been faithful to my eyes.

Brown pigmentation. Believably unphotoshopped.

GINA: Now, I have to say, you look identical to how I pictured you.

But there is nothing pictured on the left screen, and when I scrutinize the language on the right, it's unintelligible, and I can't say which part of it is me, or anyone.

ME: So, I shut her out?

GINA: Your life –

ME: Sort of.

GINA: You have your own mind. I'd know if you'd been brainwashed. You're independent. Not some puppet.

ME: I'd rather not antagonize her.

GINA: No, you'd rather not antagonize *me*. Because I have a soft spot for *you*.

(I don't think I have a soft spot for anyone.)

ME: I think she's probably afraid of you.

GINA: She should be. I mean, after what you've told me, I'm really thinking of punishment. Are you? Afraid of me?

ME: Should I be?

GINA: Oh, I don't know. Truth is, I'm a little afraid of *you*.

ME: Me?

GINA: Well, every player tries to break a game.

ME: I wouldn't do that.

GINA: No? I suppose you're right. There'd be implications.

ME: We're neighbors.

GINA: Ah, that. Almost partners, then. Let's be transparent with each other.

Does she mean teamwork?

ME: I don't trust the other person. Her, I mean.

GINA: I'd like not to trust you. I think you'd be more interesting that way. Make bad things happen. You know, every game should have a monster. I forgot to make one.

ME: I'd like to be more than a pair of hands.

GINA: We all have our complaints. Shortcomings. Show me.

Does touch lead to death? I raise my (mere) hands to her. A bit of wrist appears too – the limits of what I see of myself. Without sight of my arms, the hands feel like amputations.

Her hands reach out to grab mine. I don't feel their weight. She inspects them, gives a slight tug, as if my hands might detach, but I don't register the sensation, even though it's skin-on-skin.

We hold still like that for a very long time. Our hands, hers over mine, feel combined, and I guess the feeling – *my* feeling – would be embarrassment.

Finally, she releases them.

GINA: Fine specimens. That was nice. It felt like we were two living things. I don't know if anyone ever said this to you before, but you have a strong pulse.

ME: My hands don't touch things very well.

GINA: Generic. They're from an asset store. I realize you probably don't want to hear that, but I did a bit of sculpting of the material, so . . . but they're not made from scratch. Is that what you're upset about? You don't feel customized? You have so many other authentic gifts.

ME: I feel defenseless.

GINA: Don't worry about combat. You're not brandishing swords.

She rotates her wrist like she's slicing enemies.

GINA: You won't need to be weaponized.

ME: I feel incomplete.

GINA: That's what the game is for!

ME: What about the rest of me?

She surveys me up and down, angles her head this way and that.

GINA: Sometimes, I look at a person and I watch the way they perform and I think, that human being doesn't have a human face. Maybe this . . . *terrestrial* is just wearing it.

I keep my eyes fixed on her and wait for a better response.

GINA: You know, a smile wouldn't kill you.

I don't say anything to that either.

GINA: Okay, fine. I'll try to convey your individuality.

With her finger, she traces a shape in the air, like she's drawing an outline of me. I don't have a clue what she's doing.

GINA: Others might say you're faceless. But I'd say your expression is quite animated.

ME: I haven't seen it myself.

GINA: Well, I've kept most of you hidden. But that's part of your allure. Sure, your hands stick out, but that's by design.

ME: But can't you tell me something else? About me?

A long pause, a worrisomely drawn-out assessment, that makes me feel inadequate or featureless, composed of errored parts and vague measurements.

GINA: There is a nice level of color to your eyes. A good contrast.

ME: To what?

GINA: Oh, never mind. Why these superficialities? You have regular eyes in your regular head. Beyond that, you are uncategorizable. But believe me, you have extraordinary capabilities. Superhuman, really. You have a fine physique. And you are whole. You are not some skeletal rig.

What she said, it gives me a bodily boost. It pleases me, to know I'm not just an empty casing.

ME: I think I maneuver pretty well.

GINA: And in all directions. Diagonally, even reverse. I really like the physics of your walking. No buckling knees. Or slippy steps. To live with your stability. And those energetic strides! Gosh, I wish I could walk like that – it must feel like levitating. I should borrow your coordination. We should trade legs.

She makes a mock gesture of grabbing her leg and handing it over.

ME: Are there more staircases? I liked going upward. It felt like skimming up a waterfall.

GINA: Unfortunately there's just the one. I put myself on higher ground. The observatory. I think that's a nicer word than command center. Anyway, everyone else's drama is down below. I think that was only fair, for me to be the pinnacle.

I stare down at my feet.

GINA: Oh, what's the matter? I'm sensing dejection. Look at that sour face.

I was hoping for a bigger challenge: a spiral staircase. I have an urge to utilize my legs to ascend and wind and rise triumphant – victory points gained as I conquer a hill or why not scale a mountain? My heroic powers feel hollowed out. What's the point of my climbing system?

GINA: I know, I know. It's not hopping rooftops. But most of the houses have front steps. There's your little leap.

Speaking of, there's the question of *my* habitation.

ME: I heard my house doesn't exist in the game.

GINA: It's not a playable area.

I don't know why I keep glancing at the left monitor, when no animations are visible.

ME: I think maybe it should be.

I watch her contemplate, weigh a response.

GINA: Trust me, not having a domain is favorable. I think it's best that you have a *view* from your house. Besides, your dwelling is odd. Perplexing, architecturally. I would have some textual issues with it. Textural.

ME: You know the layout?

GINA: You have two bathrooms upstairs – useless rooms for you – and they're both tub showers.

ME: How'd you know that?

GINA: Zillow listing. I checked when I was married. We were on the market. Might have been our house-to-be. That's an old story. Wedlock: a dirty word. Deadlock, headlock…

ME: But you don't know me.

GINA: Your life's a blur. Honestly, if I started saying things, it's doubtful they've occurred.

ME: I have a memory of moving in. No, I don't. Being welcomed into the neighborhood. That's where I start.

GINA: Your birthplace. Your first day.

ME: I don't understand. Was I born here?

GINA: You're asking *me*? I can't know everything.

ME: How come it feels like my past never happened?

GINA: A blank period. We all have them. Although, in my case, it's not a bad thing to forget the past. Ages ago, Gina was married to… hmm. I'm stumped. A gap in the chronology. Sweet amnesia. The point I was making, you'll need multi hours, lots of them, to play. A full commitment.

ME: I'm here, aren't I?

GINA: You are. And it's so nice to see you speak.

ME: But it would be nice if I had somewhere to go, when I'm not in the game.

GINA: You're always in the game.

ME: When I'm not interacting. Don't I rest somewhere?

GINA: And yet, when I think of you, you're only *awake*.

ME: I'd probably play longer if I took breaks.

GINA: I guess I just assumed you were no-lifing it. What are we talking about here? A bed to snuggle in? A sectional sofa? A loveseat? Or maybe you're only thinking about a chair.

ME: Not a gaming chair. Not like this one.

GINA: Your own. But functional. How about a futon? I have a furniture pack. Sorry, that sounded lazy. It just means it's premade, so you'll have it faster. Don't worry, I'll make it fit, I know your contours. Your dimensions. Ugh, more adjustments. On and on, again and again. Never-ending, unfinished, over and over, painstaking…torture!

Her hands choke at her throat, but I understand enough now to know fake violence.

GINA: I really didn't think you were going to ask for accommodations. Maybe you should hire an interior decorator. Maybe you want an outhouse so you can take an imaginary crap! Oh, don't you have enough doors and cabinets and drawers to open? I know *I* do. Room by room by room. You're really frustrating my brain. EVERY HOUSE IS TOO MUCH HOUSE!

Suddenly, like a receptor short-circuiting, she places her head down on the desk and snores like she's fast asleep.

Awkward silence. But I'm not going to apologize.

GINA: I should rest.

She speaks from her sleep position.

GINA: No, I should exercise – clear my head. And I should shower. My underarms could use a wash, but I don't expect you to detect the odor. And I don't expect you to understand my fatigue. I know I'm not being exactly healthy.

What would it mean, for me, if her health took a bad turn?

ME: You should take care of yourself.

The line gets her sitting up straight.

GINA: I'm in bad shape. Stiff joints. Legs that won't cooperate. Oh, the creaky machinery. I feel like I'm made entirely of used-car parts. How lucky you are with your durability. Where did my body go? Answer me. And whenever I go up my stairs, I huff and puff. One of these days I'll remake myself. Improve fitness. Up the horsepower. Get the blood flowing!

She begins typing. Is she reconceiving me or reengineering herself? Or maybe she's addressing us both simultaneously, the keyboard taps intertwining our lives, the lines alternating between me and her, altering us. It's pointless for me to screen-peek an opaque alphabet. I'll only feel illiterate. Except: if I don't know this language, the cryptic designations, how can I ever know her?

GINA: The thing is, when I'm making this game, a part of me feels all muscle.

She flexes both biceps.

GINA: Want to feel?

ME: Uh . . .

GINA: Too close? Let's stay distant. Some neutral talk. The weather. I decided not to put in any. Rochester's, I mean. I didn't want to bother with weather particles. For your whole climate-controlled life, you'll be bone-dry. But I threw an occasional wind in there.

She flicks her hand.

GINA: You'll never feel the rustle, of course. And no raindrops will hit your precious flesh. The world I've made . . .

Some disturbance moves across her face.

GINA: I've created enough storms.

She seems far away – I look at my feet to make sure I'm not receding – but we're both right here, in the small, slanted room, with walls you could bump your head against, so I guess she's gone inaccessibly inward.

ME: It's weird. I know your house address, but I can't remember mine.

GINA: I sympathize. Everyone else's life feels so much more important than my own.

ME: I'm making a simpler point. Something specific. My home.

GINA: Right. I'm saying, I identify with your limitations. Even if I don't know anything about your upbringing.

ME: I don't know it either.

GINA: You see?! It's like we're descended from each other. We both know what we don't.

Why this roundabout talk? Abandon subject matter. Establish new line of inquiry.

ME: Why'd you make the game?

GINA: Life was lonely. I wasn't close to anything. Now –

She waves her hand at me.

GINA: Look at how I coexist. You and I are one.

More keystrokes, her fingers inputting . . . what? I watch characters – a line of words and numbers and symbols – emerge on the right monitor, and flow rightward, but I can't grasp the instructions, the language and punctuation too dense, crammed. Or empty. I see a set of parentheses together, with nothing inside, like the meaning is missing, like she's typing so quick she erred, unless she's programming emptiness. I wait for her to insert something there, to fix the typo and put something in the gap, and her mouth moves like she's mumbling to the code, and I look back at the parentheses, and they resemble a set of lips tipped over, or tilted up, with nothing coming out, and she's already typing the next line of indecipherability, and I wish the left screen would reappear so I could determine output, so I could see the real characters, but it won't while I'm here.

She fans her face, gives herself some air, which I guess confirms the room is hot, although I think it's agitation, hers, and the agitation comes from me.

GINA: Well, look at the time. My schedule just got double-booked.

I scan the wall and surfaces but don't see a clock. I stand up to leave.

GINA: Yes, I'm afraid you've got to go. Half-past something-or-other. We both have our work to do. The neighbors are a-calling.

Her attention stays on the screen. Her eyes narrow.

GINA: Okay, Miss Waxface . . .

She twitches her fingers above the keyboard.

GINA: If she wants to be in the game, then let's add a wrinkle. Let's see how this life form is living. Enviable house – all the trappings – but perhaps with cracks in the façade? A crumbling foundation? Mold having its way. And look what the ferocious wind did to the gutters. Strong as a tornado. Like an act of G – oh, never mind.

Let's go inside. Goodness, the condition! I'm seeing wine stains all over because, you know. Tanked at three in the afternoon! I'm making a note to myself about the glass rings on the bedstand. (Nope, close it off, that's another room I don't want to make, much less enter. I'll portray everything with one room.) An ugly story. I hate to speculate but things have . . . degraded. Husband seems to be an error. Did I just flip the script? Anyway, I'm sincerely worried. And, oh the bugs. You spray and spray but still there's an infestation. What a nightmare. Quick: let's put in a call for pest control. She thought the house was hers. It appears someone else has taken possession.

She turns to me.

GINA: Life can really make you feel powerless, can't it?

I hesitate with a response.

GINA: Oh, how you've quickened my heart rate. Tell me: how do you feel about property theft?

ME: Me?

GINA: You, my master thief. Hand me your directory, will you?

She grabs a nearby pen. I reach behind me, and my hand comes back with the booklet. She takes it from me, and I watch her open the pages, look for the name, and when she spots it, I see her place an asterisk. The directory is returned to me and, with little effort, my pocket.

GINA: She has an alarm system, but – security breach! – I've accessed the code. And she has a safe – valuables! – but I happen to know the combination. So much authorization. In any case, I'm feeling clairvoyant: let's predict you will be. For now, though, let's not worry about what might be stealable. Let's just enjoy the weather. Although, I should have made it worse.

ME: Why?

GINA: Because then I wouldn't feel so bad staying inside. My life; anchored here.

ME: Why don't you go there? With me?

I'm not sure why I said that.

GINA: I do.

She outstretches her hands, but not to me, just the monitors.

GINA: I see it all, through the windows. The entire ecosystem.

And I think I get what she means.

Plate still in pieces from meltdown. I look at her. Then back to plate. Then particles on the ground. I'm learning something. Crash of plate no longer signifies just my own lapses and failings, but larger brokenness, greater complication. Fragility, I realize, can be a plate or a person. I want to collect fragments as evidence of her mental state. Only where would I deposit gems and such? Ask later about treasure chest? Is the power of my perception growing? Look at what nuggets I've pieced together. Is this how I'm supposed to perceive families when I see and listen to them? Is brokenness more interesting and revealing? I look at the seat where

I sat. It's empty now, again, but it's somehow different, emptier, although I can't determine why, like it's lifeless, but of course it is, because it's only a chair, and I'm external to it, so why would my absence matter, and I almost want to go sit in it again to stop it from looking so incomplete and sad – although Gina sitting in her chair looks kind of lost and somber, too, so maybe I'm entirely off in my analysis of chairs and sadness.

GINA: Your address. Do you want to know what it is?

ME: Yes.

GINA: It's the center. Because you're the centerpiece.

With that same finger that drew an outline, now it describes a circle in the air. Then she pokes a hole in the dead center. I ponder the circumference and my position therein.

GINA: I know your address, the layout, the entryway. I feel like I've been so deep inside you for years, I know every detail by heart. In so many ways, you're exactly as I imagined. Remember what you asked before, about your face. Well, I'd say you look like the inside of *me*.

She smiles, eyes beaming. Like, I don't know, a mother to a child, or like a teacher to a pupil who comprehends an important lesson. Like a private lesson, where the mastered knowledge is only mine.

And now I feel like we both smile, although I can't say what mine looks like, or if it resembles hers, which is ear-to-ear. Like her whole face is grinning. It's not that I'm happier, but I feel more alive and enlightened. Maybe dead center was the wrong way to think about inner circle. Nothing dead about a centerpoint. I feel clarified. Like I see through to the innermost workings of what's written on the monitor and even what's behind my eyes, deep down to the core. I feel . . . rewarded. Only, my reward isn't scored by a number going up.

Goodbye, she signals, with a wave. Except the gesture doesn't feel like an ending, but a bright and new beginning, and I do something I haven't done yet, which is give a wave back. I know this because I see my hand come up between us. Sight of my hand summons memory of our hand-to-hand contact, and I almost feel it, a tingle, some nerve-ending sensitivity. Or maybe that's not right: maybe it's more like I feel something inside her, a sharp electric jolt, transferring to inside me, like the two of us work as a single conduit.

GINA: Look at how we bond.

And when she says that, I remember that earlier moment when I thought she was being telepathic.

I turn away, and when I cross the room I remember my defenselessness and consider zigzagging. No, she isn't my executioner, there is no charged floor paneling, no sinister mechanism underfoot, and her plans for me aren't catastrophic. I don't fear plummeting to the depths of a hell trap. My nervous system: I don't feel half-frightened. Really, I don't feel scared at all. Then again, I wouldn't call

her harmless. (And I don't see a force field around me.) Also, maybe a part of me secretly wished for a gauntlet of weapons.

GINA: I should've told you the floor was stable. It would have saved you time and anxiety. It's been so nice interfacing. I know I'll see you again. We are with each other always. It's like we're both wearing ankle monitors!

I look down at my feet.

GINA: Oh, look at me, my hands are shaking with excitement.

I look up from my feet to her hands. She raises both of them to me but I'm too far apart to confirm trembling.

GINA: This is the most I've talked! I feel so refreshed.

And I want to say something back, but I've only just started talking, so it won't mean the same thing.

GINA: I think I'll make a big trampoline for you, in one of the backyards. So you can go somewhere *high*. I'm just thinking about what you were saying before. I like that you don't really have a house. It makes you more like me, with my rental. Besides, we have all the others to play with. We have the run of every house! So much recreation. I can't wait to go door to door with you! Speaking of, I know you'll shut mine on your way out.

Which I do, consciously. I close the closable door, and when I hear the satisfying click, I feel like I exist in some climbable world. Except, I don't. Still, I stare at the solid floor, no gap in the planks, but in my mind I see two planks spread wide across, and so I leap, imaginatively, from one platform over to the distant, higher other, and when I complete the dangerous move, I know I've powered up.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen Schottenfeld is the author of the novels *This Room Is Made of Noise* (2023) and *Bluff City Pawn* (2014). His fiction has also appeared in *The Gettysburg Review*, *New England Review*, and *Virginia Quarterly Review*, among other literary magazines. He serves as Professor of English at the University of Rochester. "Life from Afar" is excerpted from his recently completed novel *Neighborhood Watch*.