

Neighbors
by Nina Kiriki Hoffman

"Grandma, there's a delivery truck out front," Kyle said.

The grocery boy made a weekly delivery, and the postman brought occasional letters and bills and all the curricula for Kyle's home schooling. Everything else they needed came from delivery trucks, except for a few special supplies. Kyle was good with computers and tracking shipments. He always knew when anything was coming, and he hadn't mentioned a shipment due today.

Anna set her brush on the easel ledge below her canvas and went to peer over Kyle's shoulder. "Are we expecting anything?"

A man climbed out of the truck by the front gate.

Kyle shook his head. He backed his wheelchair away from his observation post at the window. He always backed away when strangers approached. He was fifteen now, perhaps old enough to be better socialized, she thought, but perhaps not.

The doorbell rang.

Anna glanced at Kyle. He had retreated to the dark hallway; only the toes of his shoes were visible in the light from her still-life lamp. She went to the door.

The FedEx man was young. His hair stuck out in taffy spikes below his cap. "Please sign on line 28," he said.

"Who's it from? I wasn't expecting anything." She signed.

"Don't know, ma'am." He handed her a package about the size of a tea box. The address label was smeared. The return address label read, "A Friend" in handwriting she didn't recognize. She frowned at it, then glanced at the address label again. "But this isn't — " she called to the young man. He had jumped down the porch steps, crossed the front yard, and was already in the driver's seat of his truck.

"Wait!"

The man touched his cap and drove away.

"What is it, Gran?" Kyle rolled into the room.

"Something for the Crandalls." How could the delivery man make such a mistake? Her last name was Grant; she supposed the smear made "Crandall" look like "Grant." But the address — well. The smear had disguised that, too.

The Crandalls, a man, a woman, and two bad-tempered children, had lived next door for six years. They had interested Anna and Kyle on many levels, but they were fairly secretive; details had been difficult to collect.

They had moved out last week, in something of a hurry; they had hired extra help, dark brawny young men Anna had never seen before. Kyle had entertained Anna while she painted by describing each item as it made the journey from the Crandalls's front door to the back of their U-Haul. That day she had been painting one of her special commissions, a still life of cheese cubes and a stuffed raccoon, and she had to paint fast before the cheese dried. Polaroids weren't big enough to derive fine details from. Still, Kyle's report had made her look up from her work more than once.

They had learned things about the Crandalls that day that living next door for six years hadn't taught them.

The exercise equipment must have come into the house in boxes to be assembled, but it came out whole, and there was a lot of it, with some really heavy weights. Some of the chrome assemblies with leather straps and

