

[The Closing](#)

by Freida Theant

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“Warm, yellow mid-morning sunlight; I love how it shows this house off!” her platinum blond hair glowing in the morning’s brilliance, radiating a blinding aura from her oyster-white business suit, she admires the home’s curbside appeal and slams the door shut of her black Buick Regal. JoAnn, the real estate agent for this two story, three bedroom/two bath Spanish-styled house, under contract to the sellers, has arrived.

So far, she’s the only one here for this morning’s appointment. The buyers’ agent Marie hasn’t shown up yet, and the homeowners in this upscale subdivision left the now-spotless house for the day. That leaves the pair of realtors free to hammer out the details undisturbed for the final walkthrough and pre-closing documentation.

She strides toward the realtor’s lockbox clamped to the brass doorknob, ignoring the annoying wail of sirens heard over the background traffic noise. This agent’s mind is focused on hosting a quick, trouble-free final walk-through this morning because the essential details leading to the closing had been agreed upon yesterday; at least in principal.

“Waiting around is such a waste,” she comments blankly; now all she wants to do is sit at the porch, sip hot java from her plastic-lidded latté and spark up her Marlboro lite 100 before Maria arrives. Her cigarette embraces the flame that she sucks into its tip, exchanging smoke and ash for flame. JoAnn draws a short robust pull and lets her initial puff squirt out from both sides of the filter before taking her serious hit. Lifting the Marlboro out of her cherry-hued lips, she lets slip a pulse of snowy white to roll from her red-sculpted mouth until she gulps it back in a snap and inhales it deeply along with an air chaser. Plunging it to the wellsprings of her soul, she bathes her inner core with penetrating, calming satisfaction, seizing these fumes for a few seconds and finally out-pours the river through her nostrils and mouth. The diminishing density of the pale smoke accessorizes her reflective platinum hair, scarlet lips and the rough surface of her matt-white suit. As the tumbling smoke hits the atmosphere, the morning breeze chases it off in diminishing levels of frosted fluidity.

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Her Marlboro still has 40 unburned millimeters left on it when her cell phone sounds. "Homestead Realty, JoAnn Ransome. How can I help you?" Tiny streamers of left-behind smoke shoot from her lips and nostrils with each word.

It's Marie: "You there already? Sorry you have to wait for me, dear. But my GPS says I'm only a few blocks away. I shouldn't be more than a minute."

"That's all right, Hon" JoAnn says, "I'm just waiting for you on the porch, drinking my latté."

"Is there anything going on there? Anything unusual?" Marie asks.

"No, why?"

Because my car radio says the cops have surrounded the strip mall at Williams Ave and Oak Park Drive," Marie explained. "That's just a few blocks from where you are. Shoot out in the parking lot? A drug bust gone bad? Anyway cops are looking for two suspects who got away."

JoAnn replied, "Okay, I think I heard fire trucks earlier."

"I bet those were cops, dear," Marie says. "This better not break our appointment. I've got a lot riding on this closing and I can't afford to lose it now."

Marie was as good as her word, parking her Silvered Chrysler Sedan in the driveway just as JoAnn blows her last puff skyward, signaling her growing annoyance. Still the two embrace briefly, and Marie opens the lockbox to let them in to the pristine house, where they spread out their black vinyl portfolios with their names lettered in gold on the dining room table.

"Turn the TV to channel four," Marie says, while both agents rummage through their black folios

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for whichever documents require check-offs and signatures this morning. "We should follow the live news about that shoot out over at the corner."

JoAnn clicks the remote to bring the broadcast to the HD widescreen, but channel 4 is running an info-mercial, so she mutes the image. Each realtor scatters her legal papers on the glistening waxed table when they're jolted by the growling of a motorcycle rumbling beyond the property's backyard. Marie rushes to the sliding glass door; what she sees and hears is the police motorcycle patrolling cautiously in the back alley; red-and-blue lights flashing and mobile-radio blasting gravel-voiced commands.

"They're searching here, now," Marie turns toward her companion. "Lock the doors! Windows, too!"

JoAnn darts to the front door; slams it and wrenches the lock sealed. "Door's shut tight," she announces.

Racing to the living room window, Marie surveys the view from the front, "I see a police cruiser turning onto our street! " And sudden as a summer thunder, the noise and vibrations of a Sheriff's Dept. helicopter directly overhead rock them to the core. They resonate to the engine's blasting staccato from its exhaust muffler while it hovers only fifty feet above, vibrating the ceiling candelabra.

Wide eyed, both of them stare at each other astonished, and JoAnn screams.

Marie unlocks the front door and shoots through it, racing toward the squad car that rolls slowly toward the house. She flails her arms to flag down the pair of sheriff's deputies inside, calling out, "What the hell's going on!"

JoAnn, following, snatches up her Marlboros, lighter and purse; pops out onto the porch steps to watch Marie interrogating the deputies through their open passenger window. JoAnn tries to fire up a comforting cigarette but the trembling of her fingers prevent her. The desperation of nicotine hunger prevails and she finally transfers the flame to the Marlboro even though her

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anxiety is evident in the monster drag she tears from the filter. Vacuuming in the smoke, fingers pinching the cigarette visibly, she pumps in more cloudy white relaxant while simultaneously releasing the smoky first round.

Marie waves her hands at the deputies as she turns away and dog-trots to the porch.

"Gimme one of those," she commands, indicating JoAnn's Marlboro, mounting the front steps. "They say two suspects fled the crime scene, both male, mid-twenties, maybe a south East Asian gang....Vietnamese."

"They think they're still around here?" JoAnn asks, jumping the array of white 100's to inch out from the flip-top box and extends them toward Marie.

Marie's first two fingers dislodge the closest filter tip to jam it between her grim lips, replying, "Yeah. They've got this area under air and ground surveillance. But they still don't know where the suspects are. Pass me your lighter."

JoAnn slides into her palm. Seeing Marie's flame struggling with the breeze, she cups her hands around the cigarette's nose. Marie can now pull a quick light-up drag that she exhausts in an pale bluish squirt, and then hauls a serious drag that visibly burns a few millimeters inward from the pan-shaped ember.

"Maybe we should get outta here," JoAnn says while returning her Marlboro to her lips tense with stress.

"I can't. I've got to get this closing wrapped up on time or it's going to cost me big time," Marie counters. "The cops won't be here too long....after all, the druggies are running away from the scene, not hiding out. They would really stand out this neighborhood."

JoAnn's treats her lungs to the rasping, tingly burn and she forces the filter out from her

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collapsed cheeks and tight lips, which are pulled into a brief pout because they are reluctant to release the cigarette until the force of her red-tipped fingers cannot be denied. Curly white streamers and whorls spiral from the filter's fibers winding around. She can number the seconds that the vapors dwell within, and reluctantly squeezes them back out, ever so slowly through her nose, in scudding plumes.

Both realtors scrutinize the yard and hedges for signs of penetration, listening for intrusive sounds, but the scene is a picture postcard of a tranquil bedroom suburb.

"I'm going around back," Marie says, dangling her cigarette from her taut mouth, keeping her hands free "Just in case. If I yell, dial 9-1-1."

Okay. But I'm staying here....to watch the street," JoAnn replies. There is a hint of hysteria as she adds, "And if I shout, you get back here."

JoAnn reseats herself at the porch to scan the neighborhood for activity, while waiting for Marie to return. The September breeze rustles crinkled leaves and clatters a few boughs, but otherwise, she senses no threat. The steady comfort of her cigarette's smoke damps the salty taste of fear poisoning her mouth, and represses the throbbing in her chest. Calm returns with her even, smooth drags. She dribbles the exhale back out in glacially slow, gentle nasal ribbons.

The thrumming of the helicopter overhead announces that it's on a second sweep of the block, pulling JoAnn's gaze up skyward. "They obviously haven't found them," she comments vacantly. "Marie should be back by now," she realizes, and hesitatingly retraces her companion's track into the back yard.

Just as she passes to the back yard, she spots Marie at the hedges standing a few feet from an Asian man. Marie's body language even at this distance, clearly is pleading with the unknown figure, who grips a dark object with its barrel pointed roughly towards her.

"Oh No!" JoAnn groans, and flees, hoping the stranger didn't spot her coming. Her cell phone

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was left on the dining room table!

Bursting into the dining room, she snatches her cell to press the 9-1-1 button, but out of the side of her eye she spots, on the wide screen TV, an aerial shot of sheriff's deputies milling around two captives lying flat on the grass. Lettered in red beneath the clip was the message, "News Alert: Last two suspects caught by police at Williams Avenue Mall."

"What the hell?" grabbing her cell in her left hand, JoAnn presses her face to the rear glass door to re-study the scene in the back yard. Marie has moved further away from the house, and waves her left arm at the fence hedges, and the oriental stranger half hidden in the shadows watches her stoically with the barrel of the shiny metal thing drooping.

Pressing the 9-1-1 button, she gets the dispatcher, "What is your emergency, Ma'am?"

"One of the suspects from the Williams Avenue crime scene is here in this backyard!" she screeches.

"Ma'am, I doubt if that's one of the suspects," The voice droned flatly. "They are reported as 'in-custody'. All of them."

The realtor's frustration explodes, "But I'm looking at him. I think he has my associate at gun point!" She flings the door open, and she chases toward the pair by the hedgerow, advising the operator, "I'm going to confront him, now!"

"Don't you touch her!" she yells at the shadowy man in the dirt-smeared denims. "I've got 9-1-1 on the line!"

Marie whirls around to face JoAnn, who shuffles forward, with one arm outstretched, and shaking her cell phone with the other hand.

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“Why did you call 9-1-1?” Marie hollers, coming over to JoAnn. She raises her half-length Marlboro to her pink frosted lips and sips a tentative pull while she awaits JoAnn’s response.

“This guy, here....he has a gun on you, doesn’t he?”

“That’s not a gun. That’s a sprayer nozzle,” and with that she sprays a hissing, snowy haze of her own, somewhat sarcastically, to show her irritation over the misunderstanding. “This is Eddie Nakamura; he’s the landscape gardener for the owners,” Marie clarifies. Tearing that last drag angrily from the dwarfed cigarette, she gives her chest the time needed to catch and release the fumes before assuring the astonished JoAnn, “He comes on Wednesdays to tend the grounds, and I just asked him to come back later, after we’re done with the clients.”