

## Child of God

Hi. My name's Carla O'Brien. I live in Bloomfield, New Jersey, on Orchard Street. I have three children. I'm...okay, I'm divorced. That's still hard to say, though it's been six years now.

I've been thinking about my neighbor, Margaret, and her son, Alex. I just read in the newspaper that he died. He was walking down the middle of the road at night, and a car hits him. Bam! Breaks his neck. Dies instantly. I couldn't ever think of a way to help that young man besides holding him in my prayers every day. That's what we're here for, isn't it? To help each other?

It all started when me and my husband Kevin and our two kids moved here. My neighbor, Ginny, comes over for a chat to introduce herself, and, among other things, she tells me that Margaret, who lives in the big yellow house across the street, is taking care of her husband, Paul, who had a stroke. So I make up some of my famous sausage and peppers and take it across to her by way of introduction, and we get along just fine. Turns out Margaret's quite a cook herself – we laugh that she's more kielbasa than sausage though.

I can see Paul lying on a bed in the back room next to the kitchen. The dog's asleep on the floor next to him, and both of them are breathing, breathing. Paul's in some kind of coma, but Margaret doesn't want him in a nursing home. She's sleeping on the couch in the living room so she can hear him during the night! That's love, right?

A couple of months later Paul dies, and right after that, Kevin leaves me for Maureen. Now we're both in a state of shock. Margaret says every time she gets up the room spins – from grief,

she says – she says she feels like she’s ascending to the ceiling and looking down on everything. And I’m crying day and night about Kevin and Maureen. We both need a shoulder to cry on and I go over there almost every day.

We get to be friends, though she was different from me. I’m just a regular housewife type, but she was really smart. She used to be a professional piano player -- spoke three languages, knitted, cooked, and even wrote a book. She was a packrat, though, and could have lost quite a few pounds. Maybe fifty.

After Kevin left I wanted to stay in the house, so I needed to make some money. I had never had a job in my life, unless you count serving up ice cream on the weekends in high school. Margaret and I figure out how much money I’ll need and Becky Frank, who lives next door to Margaret, gets me a job at her doctor’s office. I think maybe Margaret put Becky up to that.

It wasn’t a one-way street. One day Margaret’s dog is barking and barking, so I go over to see what’s wrong, and Margaret’s out cold on the living room floor. Diabetic shock. She always said I saved her life, and I told her no, it was the dog!

Margaret doesn’t want to move either, mostly because she wants to keep a place for her son Alex to come back to. He’s mentally ill, she says, so he keeps on going into the hospital. When they let him out he goes to a rooming house sometimes, but usually comes back to Margaret’s. He just shows up at the door.

Once I started working I didn’t see so much of my neighbors. I was so tired every night, and had to do all the things around the house that Kevin used to do. It was worth it, because the kids didn’t have to change schools and leave their friends.

The first time I see Alex he's sitting on the front steps of her house. It's 35 degrees and he's wearing a white short-sleeved tee shirt. Ginny says he's a paranoid schizophrenic, and I don't want one of those across the street. People say they never seen him do anything violent, still I tell the kids not to walk on his side of the street when they come home from school.

At confession, I talked about Alex with Father John, who gave me a couple of Hail Marys and a pat on the back. He said it was natural to not want to be around people who are so insane. He said Alex was a child of God, and I really did try to see him that way.

Alex was strange, but aside from the time he set Margaret's house on fire (Margaret said that was an accident), he didn't cause trouble. Ginny said that before I moved in Margaret had to spend a couple of weeks in the hospital and Alex "cleaned up" her house. He threw away everything -- the book Margaret was writing, the deed to the house, all her letters from Paul, everything that wasn't nailed down. I don't know who was taking care of Paul while she was in the hospital, but whoever it was didn't stop Alex from cleaning up. Margaret was devastated, as you can imagine, but she understood that Alex was trying to help.

That first time that I saw him he stayed a couple of months, then he's back in the hospital and the neighborhood is back to normal.

A few months after that, I notice a woman and her two children, probably five and eight, going in and out of Margaret's house. Becky Frank says the woman, her name is Helen, has moved in with Margaret and that she's nice and the kids are well behaved. I bring them cookies that Christmas, and we laugh because Margaret had been making cookies with the kids and they give a little box of cookies right back to me. I tell the kids to come over to my house and I'll show them how to make pizza from scratch.

As I said, I wasn't visiting Margaret very much, but one time I had a whole pan of leftover sausage and peppers from Parent's Night so I took it over. Margaret's spending more and more time in the same bed Paul was in. I probably should've offered to help her more, but Helen was looking after her, and she could still get up and do a few things.

Almost a year goes by and Alex is back home. One afternoon he's sitting on the porch steps and I see Helen's oldest kid Billy start up the steps. Alex says something, and Billy shoves him a little. Nothing else happens, but I tell Helen about it. She says neither of her kids can bring their friends home while Alex is there – he freaks them out. So it's natural they'd be angry. There's not much she can do about it except talk to Billy and tell him to leave Alex alone.

A couple of days later I'm out weeding the garden and there's Alex driving some old jalopy. How did he get a license? He turns into Mr. Donofrio's driveway, doesn't make the turn tight enough, and drives right over the rose garden! Mr. Donofrio calls me up in a fit. "Hey. That sonofabitch run over my roses. I'm calling the police! The frigging idiot! Get his mother to lock up that crazy son of hers before he kills somebody. He comes one more time on my property, I'm calling the police." He's shouting but underneath he's a sweet guy. He just doesn't know what to do.

The neighbors wonder why Helen doesn't just move out, and I tell them she's raising the kids all alone and she says she can never repay Margaret for how she took them in when she and the kids had nowhere to go and no money. So I guess she felt a loyalty there.

I ask Margaret what happened to Helen's husband. Why doesn't he come visit? She says the Court won't allow him to see the kids so, wow, something bad happened there. I wonder have we got some other criminal potentially running around the neighborhood?

I don't know that much about crazy people, but it seems they are just about normal, except for that edge of craziness. Like Alex's pants would always be an inch lower than a normal person's, and the end of his belt would hang just a little bit more floppy. It's not like he was running around naked or wearing a pink bedsheet or something – it's just a little bit too much or too little. And why do they cause so much damage, like running over Mr. Donofrio's roses? Alex wasn't violent, which was what everybody was worried about, but he did do damage.

Then I say to myself, "Well, you almost set fire to your own kitchen that time that you dripped some fat onto the burner." So I should be humble. When there's a crazy person around, you get to thinking maybe you're crazy too, like it's contagious. You see how something can push you over the edge from normal to not normal.

That old jalopy disappeared, but suddenly I realize that Alex is living on the porch! He has a roll of toilet paper up on the railing, and some newspapers, and a blanket. There's a pile of cans, lots of Coke bottles and MacDonald's cartons.

Ginny says she's seen Alex relieving himself against the house, and once she thought she saw him pull down his pants and squat behind the lilac bushes. She called the police but they say there's nothing they can do. They can't evict him from his own mother's porch. Ginny begins to keep a camera next to the window in case she sees him doing something else.

Ginny asks if I can go over there and see what's going on, because me and Margaret were closer than she was and the neighbors are getting upset. I'm upset too. I worry my kids will start feeling insecure here, and maybe they'll ask to go live with their father and Maureen.

So I go across the street with a pan of Brownies. Margaret has diabetes and she's not supposed to eat these things, but she loves them, so we get naughty sometimes.

Helen opens the door, real careful not to let Alex come in. She's happy to see me, she says, and we go into the back room to see Margaret.

"Carla!" Margaret says, all cheerful, her white hair all puffed out. She's lying in bed in her pink nightgown.

Helen gets some tea, and we all have a brownie and catch up with the latest news, and then I ask about Alex living on the porch. I try to put it nicely.

"Yes." Margaret says, a little hard edged. "I wish he could come inside."

There's a silence for a while, then Helen reminds Margaret that Alex left the water running in the sink one night and Margaret couldn't get up to turn it off, so the next morning when Helen and her kids come downstairs, the kitchen floor's flooded, with water dripping into the basement. Then Helen says Alex might set a fire, or do something else, and it's dangerous for Margaret. He just can't live there anymore.

Margaret looks kind of limp.

I say how sorry I am, and how difficult I know it is.

"He's such a sick man." Margaret says.

"Yeah," I say, and squeeze her hand.

"There but for the grace of God could go any one of us," she says.

I say that I always try to keep that in mind when I see Alex, which is true, I really do try to be humble and compassionate about that boy, well, he's not a boy.

Helen takes a long breath and blows out forever. It's hard for her.

While I am holding her hand, Margaret looks over at Helen and says, “Couldn’t we just let him in for a little while? Just to let him get something to eat, take a shower, go to the bathroom? Isn’t it inhuman to lock someone out to live like a rodent on the front porch?”

Helen looks like she’s going to cry. I think Jeez, I’ve stepped right in the middle of this hornet’s nest! But Helen’s on her high horse now, and I probably would’ve been too. She says Alex has enough disability money to go to a rooming house, and that every time he comes in to use the bathroom, he unlocks the back door or a window, and then he just materializes in the house, like Houdini, and that he’s not stupid.

Margaret gives a proud little smile. “No, he was always very bright.”

“Well! There’s something I got to say,” and I jump right in. “Ginny said that Becky Frank told her that he goes to the bathroom out on the lawn, and I’m sorry, but they have complained to the police about it. I thought I’d come over and talk to you because I wouldn’t like the police to come. I didn’t know whether I should talk to you about it or not, but I decided you should know.”

Margaret says, “Thank you, dear. I appreciate your telling me. We don’t know what to do either, do we Helen.” Margaret gives her a smile. I know she’s appreciating everything Helen is doing for her, but this is just so hard.

Helen looks more upset than Margaret now. She can’t even stay in her chair. She gets up and paces back and forth, and then she puts it in a nutshell – if I can remember this right -- “Even if we let Alex inside, it doesn’t cure him. He’s living in the same world out there as he is in here, except that he doesn’t have a bathroom out there. The same voices are telling him to do whatever

they tell him to do. He doesn't even feel the heat or the cold. He's – he's the sickest person I ever knew – they just never leave him alone. The voices. It's awful.”

“Or a shower. He doesn't have a shower either.” Margaret pitches in.

Helen blows air out through her lips, says he usually doesn't usually take a shower anyway, and sits back down.

Nobody says anything for a while.

Margaret says it's good it isn't cold because if it was cold we couldn't lock him out.

It now looks like Margaret agrees with Helen but I'm not quite sure. I'm trying to think of how to make a little joke.

Then we just sip our tea and talk about the brownies, I tell them my secret -- doubling the vanilla.

“I don't know what I would've done if my son was sick this way,” I say. “I just pray that he won't be. I pray for Alex too. It's just such a terrible thing.”

Margaret turns her head away and says, “I've given up on him. There but for the grace of god could go you. And any one of us. I would change places with him if I could.”

Helen sweeps her hair back and puts her chin in her palm, looking guilty.

Margaret talks about his beautiful manners when he was a kid, and how he played the cello like an angel. Then she says that this psychologist told her that Alex's illness was because of faulty parenting, and Helen gets annoyed and says that paranoid schizophrenia is not a parenting issue, and talks again about how he could set a fire or do something else dangerous.



Margaret says she would call 911 if there's a fire and I butt in to remind her that they take a while to get here, and then I get a little carried away and tell her that she's got to think of the neighbors too, because they don't want a house burning down in the neighborhood, and they don't want police cars scaring the kids. I stop there, but I was tempted to say that Alex on the porch was making our nice little neighborhood look like a slum.

Helen says how she hates locking him out, and if he'd only take his medication, he could come inside, and Margaret says the medicine has terrible side effects, makes his mouth dry.

We're just going around and around, and I tell them I've got to make dinner for the kids, which was true, and I give Margaret a hug, then I give Helen a hug, and I come home. I done all I could do.

About a week later, Alex was back in the hospital, and six months later, Margaret died. I went to the funeral with Ginny and Becky Frank, and even Mr. Donofrio went. There were only a few people there, but it's not the quantity, it's the quality. Helen and her children were there, and Margaret's two daughters – I hadn't even met the one who lives in California – that's how frequently she came by to take care of her mother! I don't know why she even bothered to come to the funeral.

A nice artist bought the house – all that space in the attic is great for his studio. I put Alex out of my mind, but when I read that he died, I have to admit that I started to cry.