

LORI TOPPEL
THE NEST

Sunday morning, I open the garage door to retrieve the trash can that has been sitting in the driveway since Thursday. There's a turtle out there, a snapping turtle, about fifteen inches wide and the color of mud. The head and front half of the shell are tilted upward as the back legs swipe at the dusty gravel and packed dirt.

It's June, egg-laying season.

Normally I'd be startled, but I was told about this turtle. Yesterday my husband found one of our dogs, behind a row of blooming lady's mantle, barking at her. He coaxed our dog back into the house, but, hours later, when let out again, the dog rediscovered the turtle by the deer fence. Instead of digging her way out to freedom last night, the turtle began preparing her nest early this morning, in front of the garage, the side we happen to never use. A few feet away from her, on our lawn, is another turtle, a sculpture made of green stone, about the same size as she.

Last week, as I was pulling out of the YMCA in New Canaan, where I work out, I noticed police cars across the street, barring the entrance to Waveny Park, a public nature preserve of three hundred acres. Waveny is serene, with historic buildings, recreational facilities, and miles of jogging trails.

An accident, I thought, or a medical emergency, and I drove on.

At home, checking my phone, I saw a news alert about Jennifer Dulos, a fifty-year-old mother of five, who had been missing since late May. She was last seen dropping her

children off at school, and her car was later found by Waveny. She and her husband were in the middle of a bitter divorce and custody battle. The children, who range from ages eight to thirteen, were now living with Jennifer's mother in New York City, under the protection of an armed security guard. I remembered my twin sons at age eight, feisty, airing their joys and frustrations to me as freely as they moved.

I've been feeling down lately. Months ago, my sister's husband of twenty-seven years left her, and she's nervous, edged with vulnerability. More recently, a friend's husband suddenly died, and the service was yesterday. As I walk down the driveway to view the turtle from behind, I feel as if the wild, with all its intractable uncertainty, has come to me. The turtle's backside is pitched into the shallow hole and sways from right to left. Snapping turtles can lay between twenty-five and eighty eggs. Their rear legs guide the eggs, the size of ping-pong balls, into the nest. I catch glimpses of the white shells falling beneath her oscillating tail. She sees me, too. Everyone knows to fear a snapping turtle's bite, but I don't seem to be bothering her.

It's an honor to observe her, I think: her purpose accompanied by such inimitable nonchalance.

When our two dogs need to go out, my husband and I leash them up and lead them outside the gate and up the street. On the way back into the house, we distract them from noticing the mother at work.

Soon after Jennifer's disappearance, police found blood in the garage of her New Canaan home, as well as the husband's DNA, mixed in with her blood, on the kitchen faucet. A man resembling her husband and a woman resembling his girlfriend were caught on video cameras dumping garbage bags into trash receptacles along a thirty-mile stretch in

Hartford. In the bags, police found Jennifer's blood on pieces of clothing and sponges.

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Snapping turtles live in streams, ponds, and brackish water but will travel miles over land to find a proper nesting site. Raccoons, skunks, foxes, and crows prey on the eggs and hatchlings. Once the turtle has grown to maturity, it has few predators, but there's always the possibility of a car hitting the female as she crosses the road on her way to lay her eggs.

What were the chances of this turtle ending up at our house?

Within the hour, I'm excited to see her again, to note her progress, and I step outside, but she's gone. Small mounds of gravel mark where she has covered her eggs. I take four logs from the garage and place them around the nest.

Time to let the dogs out. I stand by to see what they'll do. They sniff the logs and then trot toward the woods. Our fence, our dogs, and our daily comings and goings, I expect, will help ward off any unwelcome visitors.

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That night, flicking through channels on the TV, I learn that Jennifer's husband and his girlfriend have been arrested on charges of evidence tampering and hindering prosecution. I'm not surprised. No one is. A reaction disturbing in itself.

About a week later, both husband and girlfriend enter not guilty pleas and post bail. Police continue to dig through debris at a Hartford trash facility while divers have been dispatched to two ponds near the husband's home, the first being where he loved to water-ski.

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I wonder if the turtle is back in a stream, river, pond, or whatever water she might claim as home. Her eggs should take between nine and eighteen weeks to hatch. Come the

end of August, I begin watching for a disturbance in the driveway.

As the days pass, my desire to witness the emergence of new life grows, and as I walk by the ring of logs, I sometimes forget a woman has disappeared.