

Spring 2014

Out of Reach [Short Story]

Kathleen Fowler

Old Dominion University, kfowler@odu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english_fac_pubs



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Fowler, Kathleen, "Out of Reach [Short Story]" (2014). *English Faculty Publications*. 11.
https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english_fac_pubs/11

Original Publication Citation

Fowler, Kathy. "Out of Reach." *Wisconsin Review* 47.2 (2014): 60-69.

Kahty Fowler
Out of Reach

Abby edged past her landlord's 40-year-old special needs son. He leaned toward her, reaching out his crippled arms, which was what he always did when Abby walked by him, and Marie had left him alone on the porch landing. Even though Abby had been passing by him for a number of years, she didn't know much about him. Marie had told her he had cerebral palsy, told her he was her age, but Abby didn't linger long when Marie started talking.

Vinnie moaned, not a pained moan but the kind that people in his situation make, a noise akin to words. *Cerebral palsy*, Abby wondered—as Vinnie leaned and pitched from side to side, his eyes searching her face—*Did that mean he had an average mind and there was a man somewhere in that broken body?* As she went into the foyer behind him, she glanced back at him. He strained and rocked, facing out toward the street and away from her so that to see her, he had to tilt back his head, shaking it side to side. First one profile, then the other, each eye searching for her.

Abby wondered what Vinnie must think, stuck wherever Marie put him. Marie shouted at him as if he were a child, and Vinnie was a few years older than Abby. She would never treat him that way if he were her son, but she chose not to have children and rather liked how easily she took care of everyone else's.

She climbed the stairs to her rent-controlled Brooklyn apartment. She had a bathroom in the hallway stairwell (she felt as if she were peeing for the benefit of the downstairs occupants), peeling paint, and the sounds of Marie yelling at Vinnie to contend with. But she could afford it, and that was key.

She went to bed—all she really needed to prepare for her babysitting job the next day was a good night's sleep—but Abby tossed and turned, listening to the noise from the living room and Marie's clarion voice, talking, talking, talking to a man who couldn't talk back.

The next day, Abby lay on the floor at her babysitting job. Once she'd checked to be sure there weren't any cameras spying on her, she'd settled on the nursery's woven rug. The baby climbed around her, dragging out each one of his toys, babbling happily. And she didn't plan to fall asleep, only to rest her eyes. She felt a pang, a minor twinge of worry, about the fact that she was a highly recommended, vetted, finger-printed babysitter from a service, who had a reputation to uphold as a competent, involved baby lover, but the fact was, she took this job because she was a natural. She knew all the tricks, having come from a large family, and a little swinging or walking nipped any misbehavior in the bud. Babies behaved for her since she didn't fuss over them and treat them, well, like babies. They seemed to sense her ease around them and entertain themselves. She was a natural, but now she was tired from her restless night, and if little whatshisname would entertain

himself, she wasn't going to stop him.

She awoke to the sound of keys jangling in the door lock.

"Whoo hoh," she told little Todd or Jimmy or Tripp. As she sat up, her vision blurred from the 3-hour nap, and she managed to make out his form in the corner, passed out from his play. "Good boy," she whispered and hauled herself up. She walked over to him, lifted him gently and lowered him into his crib. A quick inspection showed he was in one piece and sleeping just fine. She mentally patted herself on the back. Twenty-five bucks an hour, a contented baby, and a nap—a successful afternoon overall. Whatshisname got a pat too.

She righted her clothes, turned on the baby monitor and made her way into the living room.

Mr. and Mrs. Covington lived in Brooklyn Heights, the most posh, storied and loveliest of the brownstoned neighborhoods of Brooklyn. The condo was spacious and airy and took up two whole floors of a turn-of-the-century building on Schemmerhorn Street. In front of an antique sideboard sat a couple of leather director's chairs, and the couch was covered in a winter white damask. Perfect for kids, Abby thought. All they needed was a cat. The Mrs. probably redecorated every season. Abby could hear the couple entering the foyer downstairs.

"Hello," someone said sotto voce.

Abby went to the top of the stairs as the pair hit the first steps at the bottom. "Hi," she said back, her voice squeaking with the effort to be heard and stay quiet at the same time, "He's asleep."

They made their way in, smelling of the heat of the afternoon and wealth, perfume and buttery French food. The Mrs. had on some kind of designer dress, too short for her age, saggy skin hanging around her knees. Earlier in the day, when she opened the door, Abby took one look at those knees and guessed that the baby must have been from a surrogate or a test tube or something. Her face was pretty smooth, but Abby knew that wasn't hard to achieve. She definitely had the bloated look of Botox or whatever was the newest plumper. The Mr. was overweight, sweating and bulging in the heat of the summer day. A ginger.

Abby watched as her timesheet was signed. Ah, the Covingtons, that was their name.

"Hope he wasn't too much trouble, Abby," Mrs. Covington said. She would have looked worried if whatever she'd poked in her forehead allowed it. Mr. Covington lumbered behind her, nodding, and quietly moving into the next room.

"Not at all, but I'm afraid I didn't have time to clean up all the toys," Abby said.

"Oh, no problem," Mrs. Covington said, tilting her head as if she were listening for the baby and then nodding, satisfied at the quiet. "We'll make sure we ask for you."

The Covingtons had passed one of her tests: Some of the jobs expected her

to tidy up even though her contract clearly stated that she wasn't the cleaning lady. Abby smiled and grabbed her bag and headed for the stairs.

One of the many reasons Abby liked to work as an over-qualified babysitter was that she couldn't get any other profession to stick. At 34, she'd been through a few things that had led her to the Pinch Sitters. She might call them unfulfilled dreams if she were more dramatic, but she had never been sentimental—more pragmatist than romantic. Her job experience amounted to one entry level position after another--she'd never been able to convince anyone she was worth more than that. The only job where she was treated as if she were special was babysitting (maybe because she couldn't convince herself she was very good at anything else). Because she could show her expertise with children immediately, she was swiftly trusted at Pinch Sitters. What she did behind their backs, she kept a well-guarded and protected secret. One that made her feel as if she were privileged and deserving—if no one could figure out she was taking liberties, she was smarter, better than these people who had money and status coursing through their veins.

Pinch Sitters called her as she walked to the subway, the Covingtons, Peggy and Worth and Little Worth—or LW as they liked to call him (hopefully now that the service had told her the names again, she'd manage to remember them)--wanted to book her for the weekend. As usual, another set of white bread parents thought they'd found the perfect solution to their sitter woes, an all-American wholesome looking woman. No accent, no need for a green card, no mess, no fuss. Abby thought of the nanny cams that were big in the 90's, and one of the shows that exposed what nannies were doing when the parents weren't around-- ignoring the children, sometimes hitting them; one standout masturbated on the couch as the baby sat in front of her. Abby still checked for the cameras at every gig because behind the scenes, her secrets might not look so good on video. She justified her indiscretions because she knew overall she took better care of children than anyone she knew. The kids needed her.

Abby's own parents spent a lot of time away from her and her brothers so that she found herself being beaten up by the older two while she took care of the younger. She clearly remembered screaming while her oldest brother, a boy who grew tall and heavy early, sat on her. He pulled her hair while she begged him to leave her alone. She still didn't know where her mother had been. Which made Abby like her mother even less. She wasn't sure how she felt about her father, but he had left when she was little, and wasn't around for her to judge.

Abby accepted the Covingtons' job, a long Saturday night while they went to an out-of-town fundraiser that lasted till the wee hours—they planned to stay at the Ritz-Carlton and come home in the morning. Overtime was delicious to Abby, and she had not-a-lot going on at her dirty Brooklyn apartment.

The next evening, Worth opened the heavy oak door. First the usual clicks,

clanks, twists and jangles of unlocking that every door in Brooklyn went through, then he heaved it in. The Covingtons' door dragged across their hard wood floor, some rubber insulation crowding the threshold.

It was as if she were being let into a secret society. Every babysitting job made her an intimate stranger in worlds where she didn't belong. And the company she worked for had only wealthy clients who lived in privileged worlds she had no hope of joining. "Hi," Abby said and walked in without hesitation. She may not have been one of them, but she knew how to play her part to everyone's satisfaction.

Worth looked tired and pale and sweaty. LW screamed from somewhere upstairs, and his mother shushed him.

Worth's eyes were trained on Abby's breasts, covered by a high-necked t-shirt, but there they were anyway. He raised one ginger eyebrow and lifted his gaze to her face. The look wasn't the leer Abby was used to getting from these waspy men—it was as if he had just noticed her double D's like you'd notice a piece of furniture where you expected it to be. If he had shrugged, Abby wouldn't have been surprised.

"Come on up," he said, and she followed him as he mounted the stairs, which strained beneath his weight.

He smelled good for a big sweaty guy. Something sweet like cookies.

Abby was attracted to him suddenly -- as if he'd challenged her. The insouciance. The wealth. As she followed him up the stairs, she imagined what it would be like to straddle him. His eyes focused on her face or trained on her breasts or both, his face loose and alive and shocked.

It would be such a cliché if Worth screwed the babysitter, and his stoicism made Abby think that was unlikely to happen. It made her all the more interested. She'd had the pleasure of dalliances with many of her Pinch Hitters—they didn't seem to mind the cliché and accepted her advances without much resistance, and she didn't worry about the morality of it all since they both obviously needed the distraction. She'd been in more than one miserable household before she'd found the Covingtons. The fact that she was a temporary babysitter played in her favor. She still got the thrill of a rendezvous in some dark corner, but there was not a whole lot of risk of getting caught or struggling with conscience. She would be out of their lives soon enough since Pinch Sitters was a temporary babysitting service. They'd have to hire her if they wanted her full time, and Abby never stayed long.

Worth moved up the stairs in front of her, wearing some sort of linen pants that hung loosely from his hips. She was certain he'd be the kind of fat man that had perfect fine legs. There was a good amount of chub hanging underneath his t-shirt, and a resignation with each stair step.

As she made the landing on the 2nd floor, she could see LW running down the hallway with a soiled diaper in his hand. Peggy was close behind him looking drained and too old to be chasing a two-year-old. Abby didn't know how old Peggy

was, probably not much older than she, but sometimes people were world weary, despite their age. LW was still screaming, and Peggy winced every time he started. "I'll be a minute," she told Abby, smiling weakly.

As Worth whizzed by Abby, she swung around after him, singing "Little Worthy Worth la la la," and bypassing Peggy easily. LW halted mid-scream and stopped short. He stared up at Abby, deep brown eyes blinking, his back against the kitchen island, and the pungent diaper by his side. She reached out, still singing, and took the diaper by two fingers. "Garbage?" she asked LW. He toddled over to a kitchen cabinet that Abby opened. "Put it in," she said, and LW took the diaper and deposited it inside the trashbin. LW's penis was a tiny button in his scrotum. Something that made her want to cover him up quickly.

"I'll go put on a new one," Abby said. Leaning over to pick him up, she walked down the hall. She glanced back to see Peggy and Worth quietly watching her. She had abruptly halted a family drama. She knew they were shocked, but she also knew deep down, at her core, babies felt as if she were a kindred spirit. Someone who understood them. She smiled, turned back to the hallway, and wondered if Worth had his non-committal gaze on her ass.

By the time she walked back into the living room, LW waddling by her side, Peggy and Worth were sitting on their off-white couch. Worth was pawing at Peggy's sleeve as tears dripped down her face. Her tears slipped over her cheekbones, dragging her mascara in charcoal rivulets. Abby sighed, the room so quiet, her breath seemed to ricochet off the hard wood.

"He was good for the nanny too," Peggy was saying to no one. In the quiet, suspended moment of silence that followed, Abby was hyper-aware of every movement and sound, every image. Peggy's eyes, veined in red and cyan green, shiny with tears; LW gargling and sucking his hand. In slow motion, unable to move quickly in the suffocating quiet, Abby handed him a toy she had taken from his room and sat next to him. Even though she couldn't make herself move quicker, she worried that the strange balance of calm that she'd achieved would topple.

Peggy was wild eyed, her face miserable and streaked with black mascara, her chest brown and puckered as if it had been in the sun too many years, showing in a V-necked top, one of those designer numbers that no one in real life ever wore. Worth's face was pale, unwrinkled--his double chins smooth white hummocks. Perfect skin. The contrast between this smooth-skinned, solid man and his overwrought, visibly shattered wife made Abby squirm in her seat, finally look away, and run her hand along the baby's leg, the soft skin relaxing the whirl of thoughts. Here she was, sharing another embarrassing and overly intimate moment with another messy family.

Abby tried to think of something to say, but comforting adults was not her forte. If it weren't for the distraction of Big Worth, she might figure out a way to leave. Pacifying an adult in the tense moments was a feat. She couldn't sing and

divert their attention as easily as she could anyone under the age of three. "You should go to your party," Abby said. She wanted to say that LW was going to be fine with her, but she knew that wasn't what Peggy cared about. Abby gave her best smile and patted the other arm, noticing Worth's manicure, his strong square fingers, and the set of his mouth. People were desperate and vulnerable when they didn't know how to take care of their children.

"Yeah, Peg," Worth said, "let's head out. It's okay. Go wash your face."

LW squeezed the stuffed lamb Abby had given him and sucked on an ear. "He could be teething," Abby said, still not able to tell Peggy what Worth managed to say. That it was okay. Because she wasn't sure it was okay. She didn't know why people insisted on having kids when all they really wanted was a perfect kid that looked like them and giggled all the time. Abby had never met a kid like that. Even the ones who started out that way didn't usually end up that way.

Worth got up. His linen pants were hiked up around his crotch. And Abby stopped worrying about Peggy and parenting as she noticed that LW didn't inherit his tiny penis from his dad. "Come on," Worth said and grabbed Peggy's hands.

Abby tried to smile, nod and look supportive. Neither parents were looking at her anyway. Nor were they looking at LW who was lying on the floor beside Abby, kicking the stuffed lamb in the air, then biting down when it landed on his face.

Worth led his wife down the hall to the bathroom. He looked back once, and as his gaze landed somewhere just below Abby's neck, an image from the nanny cam documentary flashed in Abby's mind, a video that caught the sitter with a couch cushion between her legs and her hand cupping her breast.

After Worth got Peggy taped back together and off to their affair, Abby was left to her own devices in their chi chi apartment. She pushed the nagging sights and sounds of Peggy's worn face and spirit to the back of her mind. Abby hadn't written down what Pinch Sitters told her about the Covingtons, hadn't really listened, but the more she collected attractive pieces of Worth--the skin, the manicure, the eyes that looked at her without registering emotion--the more she wanted to know what Worth's story was. LW easily went to sleep, exhaustion one of the many reasons he hadn't behaved for Peggy. Abby flicked on the baby monitor, attached the speaker to her belt and wandered down the Covingtons' hall.

First, she went into their bedroom--they had a big white bed with pillows embroidered in loopy C's. She lay down on what she reckoned was Worth's side; Peggy had pills, a glass water pitcher, and a book on the table by the other side of the bed. Worth's table--nothing. She held a pillow to her nose and smelled nothing, no manly sweat or colognes, not even the sweet smell that came from him as they climbed the stairs together. Abby imagined they had a maid come every day. No signs of a man who was probably an ex-wrestler or football player from the size of him.

Abby couldn't find any evidence of Worth. Though she knew he probably had some neatly ironed clothes on hangers in the wardrobe, she was not interested—she couldn't imagine Worth picked them out anyway—perfectly creased linen pants must be the work of Peggy and the maid. So she smoothed out their covers and wandered toward the playroom and a far door that she guessed was an office.

Sure enough when she got the door open, there was a desk and a laptop in a spic-and-span work space that had nothing personal on the walls or on any surface. She sat down in the modern desk chair and flipped open the computer.

Suddenly, the baby monitor crackled so that she jerked around in the chair. Her skin prickled, her heart raced. LW had sighed in his sleep. She had no reason to be jittery--Worth and Peggy weren't going to be home until the early morning. She'd read that being easily startled was something in the genes, but she startled easily because she grew up with brothers who were constantly knocking her around, slamming her fingers in doors, and bruising her ego with snide comments when she got too close to them. Still, even though she knew why she jumped, she couldn't stop.

And she leapt back a bit and held her hand to her pounding chest when Worth's Mac came to life. Taking a deep breath, she opened up his Documents file and found the usual--tax forms, business letters, and receipts. She clicked open the tax forms and saw that Worth was the owner of a shipping company, a place that might be a family business since it was called fucking Covington's Shipping.

She searched the web and found the company website--sure enough it said, "Covington's, since 1870" across the top. There was a page that listed the heavy hitters, the executives in the company, and there was Worth, Owner and CEO, in a high-dollar suit and tie, gold brown eyes beneath wiry red eyebrows. A satyr, light glinting off the corners of his gaze--something in the eyes of his picture that she hadn't seen in person.

She imagined Worth's face straining above her, his lips twisted, wet, his amber eyes lit up. She stared at Worth's burning eyes and pictured them in the dusky light of a secret meeting place. She tightened her thighs and rubbed both her knees, her hands itched to unbutton her pants. But she never went that far when she was left alone in people's apartments. No matter what obscene thought ran through her head, there wasn't anything sexy about pawing herself in someone else's home. She cleared the computer's search history, shut it down, and went back to the living room.

The next morning, when the Covingtons returned, the only evidence of Abby's prying was that she couldn't stop looking at Worth, studying his face longer than she should. They were too tired to notice, and Peggy signed her timesheet without asking how LW was.

"He's sleeping soundly," Abby whispered and handed Worth the baby

monitor. He gripped the warm monitor, his fingers brushing hers, his eyes gold, wan, looking somewhere over her shoulder. She was willing him to see her, fix his eyes on hers, reignite the spark she'd seen in the picture. But he mumbled thanks and turned away. For a moment she wondered if she'd been wrong, if he ever was looking at her, looking at her body, younger and fitter than Peggy's.

As she rode the subway home, she remembered how his eyes had been trained over her shoulder a few minutes earlier, not a trace of the man in the photo in them. The rhythm of the rails buzzed beneath her feet. A flash of Worth's eyes in her mind, come to life as they were in the photo online, and though the train wasn't hot, a bead of sweat rolled down her temple and onto her lips. She licked the salt from her mouth.

When the subway train pulled up at the Fort Hamilton Parkway stop, it was eerily quiet, and the usual anxiety gripped her shoulders; then, a strange mixture of panic and excitement coursed through her. The fluorescent light shone off the green tile walls. She had stepped into these tunnels so many times, coming off the train from school, from all her permutations of work--publishing, teaching, hostessing, babysitting--always her trudging along, going to her apartments, her boyfriends, her roommates. Sometimes just after she'd been alone with a father whose wife was out of town on business. Men who needed babysitters and attention. Lonely men who needed the kind of attention she needed too.

Most of the time she came home alone, and always with her back up, no matter what time of day, no matter how many people were on the subway with her, a defensiveness she'd felt since she was a little girl in a family of boys she'd never trusted. Every shadowy corner dangerous and even the lit hallway making the hair on her neck stand up. Now, she shivered as her footsteps echoed, her fear mounted and her mind fixed on visions of Worth's legs, his creamy skin and freckles, and the gold strands that were mixed in his fiery red hair.

Abby gained the street, the light of the morning bright in stark contrast to the moody subway. The heat of the day puffed against her, and she moved through the hot air the few blocks it took to get to her apartment, the new light clearing her mind of the dangers of the tunnel, and filling again with the rhythm of the train, the pictures of Worth, his eyes, his hands, fueling her desire with each step. Sweat—whether from the summer day or her roiling mind she didn't know--dripped down her face and between her breasts. Her shirt clung cold and wet to her back. It was as if the world were conspiring with her, lambent and hot and uncomfortable. Whether she would surprise him outside Covington Shipping or call him and get him to come to her, she didn't know. It might be harder than it had ever been before—this wasn't her usual willing subject--but she would find Worth and get him alone. She would grab Worth, pull him toward her, force his mouth over hers.

But then something unexpected happened, something she couldn't have

seen coming. Something that yanked her into the real world and out of the one she kept buried.

On that early morning, Vinnie, the landlord's son, sat in his wheelchair, the brake flicked up to keep him steady, Marie out of sight. As Abby came up the stairs, her mind filled with Worth, she smiled absently at Vinnie, whose eyes hunted for her as his head involuntarily moved from side to side. Heat prickled Abby's skin and she mounted the stairs, remembering Worth's firm thighs moving beneath the linen as she walked behind him, the hair on the back of her neck rose up from the residual goosebumps of the empty subway tunnel. She hit the top step and Vinnie reached for her as was his habit.

She gasped. Vinnie had a firm grip on her hip, his fingers grasping and rubbing, a strength she didn't believe.

Knocked off balance, somewhere between the top step and the landing, she swayed back. She sidestepped onto the landing, in front of him, getting loose of his grasp, leaning over him as she tried to get her footing, her shirt falling open so her chest, pushing above her bra, was exposed, and Vinnie's breath spread across her hot skin, his face moving back and forth. She was frozen there, staring at him, and he grabbed her arm, pinching with fingers that didn't meet but somehow held her. He lunged forward until his mouth floated unevenly across her, back and forth, up and down, zigzagging from breast to breast and back. He moaned softly, one hand tight around her elbow as his other hand pushed, hard and crooked and trembling between her thighs. She fumbled and pulled at his sleeve, closing her eyes, trying to get away from his agitating hold.

He moaned again, loud, a sound like human grief, so that she jerked away from him, opened her eyes, and stumbled down a couple of steps, hanging onto the iron railing. She crouched below Vinnie. He was crumpled, bent over his lap, his arms stretched out over his shriveled legs, his mouth working, his eyes black, alive in his bouncing face and paralyzed body. He grabbed at air, jerking and grabbing and groping for her. The kinked, uneven fingers belied their strength. She was far enough away that he couldn't reach.

A sharp sour bile burned up her throat. She gasped for breath and ran past him, giving him a wide berth, upstairs to her room. Worried that someone had seen her, witnessed.

She hadn't tried to calm down Vinnie, which was her impulse and her habit. As if he were a child, she felt guilty for leaving him. Was there somebody in there, childlike and confused, needing comfort?

Abby sat on her bed in her empty room. She pulled her shirt together, feeling Vinnie's mouth wet against her skin in the heat of the day, and the thought that he was a man, not a child, made her eyes sting, her vision darken. She clenched shut her eyes and cried, her mind full of the back seats and hotel rooms she had

shared with men whose children she didn't recall and the moment they were inside of her that felt like victory.

There wasn't anything she could say to Marie. Abby would steer clear of Vinnie (Hadn't she always?). She hoped that no one had seen her with him on the stoop. She imagined the conversation, how she'd explain that she didn't pull away immediately, that she'd forgotten where she was. And she was surprised – as her brain scrambled to arrange what happened in a way someone could understand – she felt she'd been caught in an obscene and shameful act. Her own part in the fumbling and pawing wasn't clear to her. I tried to get away, she thought, but she knew she hadn't. Her face colored – this was her fault. She had been stuck in front of him, as if she'd planned it, ready and off balance and eager.

Marie's strident voice rumbled in the apartment below—Abby could never hear the words but the antagonism in the muffled tone was clear. For once, Abby was glad Vinnie couldn't speak, had no way to tell his mother something had happened with Abby.

She could live her life whatever way she chose, but she was as paralyzed as Vinnie. She was stuck making life easier for other people--and making it harder behind their backs.

Pulling a pillow over her ears, fending off sounds from downstairs, she imagined Worth's perfectly manicured hands, soft and persistent, working their way under her shirt. In her own bed, she pushed at air, willed Worth away. She'd taken advantage of people, drawn them to her, manipulated them. She fell into a restless sleep. In her dreams, she grabbed at the dark, wrestled with faceless bodies, jerked and twisted as her fingers tangled with broken hands.