

Suspicious

Elizabeth Engstrom

"This is where she's at her best."

—*Locus*

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FICTION

Dark. Haunting. Unforgettable.

25 handpicked stories from
Elizabeth Engstrom's archives

In this collection, Engstrom will give you a glimpse into her world, where love, death, sex, family, friends, technology, the government, religion and pretty much everything else is suspect. She'll take you across the River Styx, welcome you aboard the judgment day train, let you witness the righteous death of a bad, bad man, climb aboard a mothballed Navy ship out for revenge, and take you to a tattoo parlor for a transfiguring experience. You'll find mystery, erotica, science fiction, fantasy, horror and humor, side by side with moving human drama and cautionary moral tales. Viewing the world through her dark, edgy lens will likely distort your vision and ever so gently nick your heart.

These stories are not for the faint of heart, the squeamish, or the prudish. Engstrom reaches deeply to pull forth some harsh realities. If you want light entertainment, you'll find some of that here. But for the most part, sit back and get ready for a ride that will take you to places within yourself that you never knew existed.

She's suspicious, all right, and for good reason.

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successor to Shirley Jackson."

—Douglas Clegg
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Suspicious

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SUSPICIONS

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Dedicated to Al Crafty, of course

Acknowledgments:

No author can spend twenty years honing the craft of fiction without amassing a tremendous load of indebtedness. I owe thanks to each member of my small, deeply disturbed following, each teacher, student, and influential writer. My debt extends to friends and family members who have contributed mightily to my disquiet, which leads to this type of fiction. To name specific names here would be to exclude the majority. So if you're reading this and wondering if I'm including you, I am.

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Foreword

I can't help having suspicions. I try to draw the line at being cynical, but in assembling this collection of short fiction that I have written over the years, I can't help but see a theme that runs through my work.

Apparently, I'm suspicious.

I'm certain that I first learned that things aren't always as they appear when I learned that my parents were just people instead of omnipotent gods. Psychologists say this is a milestone moment in the lives of most children. Perhaps I have never recovered. Certainly I continue to be suspicious about everything. Or maybe *suspicious* is too harsh a word. Perhaps I'm merely inquisitive. Perhaps skeptical.

Nope, I'm afraid that suspicious is the proper word.

I'm suspicious about pretty much everything, but mostly I have suspicions about other people's motives. Why are they nice to each other? Why are they nice to me? Why do they do the things they do, at the time and place that they do them? I want to know.

I want to know about The Great Unknown and why some people say they know more about it than I do. How did they get a special pass? I want to know about death, and why some people say they know more about *that* than I do. Ditto sex, a very interesting, sometimes funny, always intriguing topic. I want to know why some people have friends and some don't. I want to know why some families are close and others aren't. I want to know about love. And our government! I have been inside the Office of Disinformation in the Pentagon. Don't tell me I don't have a right to be suspicious.

For this collection, I have selected stories from the past twenty years of my writing career. In it, you'll read about my suspicions, as they are cloaked in fiction, and perhaps you'll recognize some of them as kin to some of your own.

If you have any of the answers to my questions—most not yet asked—please don't tell me. I've become fond of my suspicions, and they fuel me.

Suspicious About the Unknown

Life holds some pretty odd experiences—the unexplained Twilight Zone stuff that occasionally happens to all of us. Serendipity, divine intervention, ESP, telekinesis, magic, hypnotism, mind over matter, channelling, past life regression...one gets the feeling that there's a master mind out there somewhere, and we're trying to get a grasp on the part we're playing while making up our lines as we go. But behind the scenes surely lurks a vast retinue of scene builders, lighting technicians, directors, makeup artists, special effects specialists and writers that are coaxing us forward hint by hint.

Will any of us ever be privy to a sweeping overview? Or is puzzling it out, piece by piece, a part of the script? Aren't you a little suspicious about the motives of those behind the scenes?

Rivering

Deborah pulled the old van to a rolling stop on the pebbled beach right at the inside of the river's elbow. She looked through the bug-spattered windshield and felt the weariness creep up the back of her neck. "Let's get out and see what she looks like, Moose." She unbuckled her seat belt, let it drop to the floor with a clank, then stepped over the dog and slid open the side of the van. The beach crunched underfoot as she stretched.

Moose, an ancient collie, slowly got out of the van after her. He too, stretched, then put his nose to the ground and began to wander.

"Don't go too far, boy," she said. "Dinner in a half hour. We'll start work in the morning."

Deborah limbered up after the long drive with ten minutes of calming yoga stretches. Then, before the daylight faded away, she walked down to the river's edge, took off her tennis shoes, and waded in up to her ankles. It was a perfect location. It looked just like the type of place the slivers would congregate.

Well, she'd find out in the morning.

She went back to the van, brought out the little cook stove, dipped water from the river and cooked up some dehydrated stew. It wasn't great, but it was easy and it was protein. She opened a can of food for Moose, and they set to their dinner.

Afterward, she didn't even wash the dishes. She set them outside the van, spread her sleeping bag out on the van floor, and fell instantly asleep.

All night long she dreamed of catching slivers. All night long she dreamed of catching the right slivers. Her slivers.

She got up before dawn, excitement brewing in her belly as the coffee brewed on the stove. In the early hours, she'd had an important dream, and she knew that this was the place. This was where she would find and catch the slivers she'd been rivering for all year. She wouldn't have to scout river after river, state after state, any more. It was such a peaceful idea, she hoped it wasn't just wishful thinking. But she'd never felt this way before. She'd never had a dream like that before, either.

She let Moose sleep in while she did her morning exercises, facing the color of the sky. Then she breakfasted on a peanut butter and honey sandwich, drank two cups of coffee, did all the dishes and roused the dog. "C'mon, Moose," she said. "It's time to find Dad."

She twirled the combination lock on the little safe she had installed under the driver's seat, opened it and took out the seven little leather bags, each with a long tether wrapped around it. She unwound the tether from her two and put the other five in her pocket. Then she got the net from the front seat and the little cooler with its chunk of dry ice.

Moose walked with her down to the river. She looked at the water, black in the early light. She squinted her eyes and looked downstream.

There! She saw one. The starlight caught a little flash of silver. An untrained eye might think it a minnow. Tingles ran up her spine. She took the cooler and the net upstream. She took off her sneakers and rolled up her pant legs.

She waded into the icy water slowly, quietly. The river undercut the bank the tiniest bit, and that's where they would be. She tied the tethers to the rings she'd sewn to the legs in her jeans, then dropped the pouches into the water and watched as they flowed downstream, moving in the gentle current.

Then she stood absolutely still.

Moose, seeming to sense the urgency, also remained motionless.

A little silver glinted in the water. She waited. It seemed to sniff the pouches, and then was off. Not the right one.

She waited until the sun came full up, until her feet were so numb from the cold that her back ached, and nothing had come for the bait. Moose had wandered away in hopes of finding a rabbit.

She brought in her two lines and set the other five out in the same way. No luck.

At noon, she brought them in, and stiffly walked up to the van. It was still a good place, and there were slivers here. It was just that *her* slivers didn't seem to be here.

She heated up some soup and lay down on her sleeping bag. Her bones ached from motionlessness, cold and disappointment. She'd try again after a rest. If she didn't get something soon, she'd be out of money.

She opened the pouches so they could dry. In the first one was the tip of Roger's forefinger, the crucifix he always wore, and a dried bud of his favorite rosebush. She lay these things out on a tray to dry. She couldn't let them rot. In the second pouch were her father's little toe, his wedding ring and the waterlogged and no-longer-recognizable picture of her mother he always carried in his wallet. The other pouches held similar pieces of the anatomy and significant memorabilia of the deceased. She didn't know these other people, and had nothing to do with them. She was rivering for hire. Paid to find dead people's souls, slivering about in the elbows of the rivers. And if she didn't have some luck soon, there would be no more customers.

Deborah would never forget how she first heard about rivering. She had been eavesdropping on her parents' conversation when they had guests over. One of them had just hired a riverer to find his mother, so he could finally, once and for all, have control over her. The discussion heated, and while the adults went into the moral issues, Deborah went deep into her own world, thinking about the life of a riverer. And the concept stayed with her, as if she had heard her calling when she heard that conversation, and she waited patiently for her time to arrive. A year ago, it had.

When everything was laid out and drying in the back window of the van, Deborah had her soup. Rivering was a lonely business. It took a lot of energy to keep her doubts from taking over. She knew from talking to other riverers that success was infrequent, but she'd feel better if she could catch just one. Discouragement was heavy, sometimes. She'd been on the rivers, just her and Moose for almost a year. With no luck.

When Roger died, leaving so much unfinished business behind him, she knew she would go rivering for him. When he was laid out at the funeral home, she asked for a moment alone with him, and with her penknife, sliced the tip off his forefinger. She put it in her food dehydrator, and saved the little grey, curled slip of leather in her jewelry box.

When her dad died, she paid the mortician's assistant twenty bucks to cut off his little toe. And when Joey started college on a scholarship up at Colorado State, Deborah began rivering.

It wasn't long before she was out of money. But along the way, she'd talked with others who rivered and it seemed like there were no end to people who wanted to recover other people's souls. So

she took out a little ad, and from the hundreds of replies, she selected five at a thousand dollars apiece, and now that money was almost gone, too.

That discouragement mixed with the loneliness of a riverer, and Deborah hugged the big, salty-smelling dog who lay next to her and fought back the tears. "You stink," she said to Moose. "Tomorrow I'll give you a bath."

After a short nap, Deborah repacked the tiny pouches and went back to that same spot in the river. The old timers always told her to listen to the messages in her dreams. She pushed her doubts back and let the truth come over her. She knew she would have success here.

She stood in the shallows with pieces of her father and her husband until she was almost blind from staring at the shining water. Then she changed, tied on the other five, and immediately there was a boiling stir.

One by one, she pulled in the pouches, very carefully, very gently. She had to know for sure which one had attracted the sliver. When only one pouch was left trailing in the current, and the sliver was still there, swimming wildly around it, she swiped with her net.

And she had it. She'd caught it!

"Look, Moose!" The dog backed away, slowly wagging his tail.

Very carefully, Deborah took the net to the shore, opened the little cooler and turned the net over onto the dry ice.

The ice sizzled and smoked as the sliver and the water from the net touched it, and for a moment, Deborah worried that she'd lost it. She blew down, and she could see it, a little silver sliver, lying still as death on the block of ice. She put the cover back on. "I got one, Moose," she said gently, her heart pounding. She opened the pouch and emptied its contents onto the cover of the cooler. There was an unidentifiable piece of flesh—an earlobe perhaps—a swatch of black hair, and a foreign coin. Inside the leather was written the name and phone number of the person searching. Seiji Okano. Deborah put the artifacts back into the pouch, opened the cooler, picked up the sliver and studied it. She expected it to look like a fish, but it didn't. It just looked like a little silver slip of something, about three inches long, maybe half an inch in diameter. No eyes, no mouth, no tail, just a little slip of silver. It was hard to believe that this was the soul of Seiji Okano's wife. She put the sliver into the pouch with the other things and put the pouch on top of the ice.

"We're on a roll now, Moose, buddy," she said, and stepped back into the water.

By dinner time, she hadn't caught anything else, but she believed wholeheartedly in her dream. This was her spot.

Probably every one of the remaining six slivers to be caught were here somewhere. And she would catch them.

That night Roger came to her in another dream.

"Deborah, I'm sorry," he said, over and over again. Her heart ached. He'd come closer, puppy-dog look on his face, hands out, and her heart would pound with fear and she'd back away. Then he would look hurt and turn away, and she would approach him again, *please don't go, don't leave me again*, but as soon as he moved toward her, "Deborah, I'm sorry," she would back away, fear pounding in her chest.

She woke up sweating. She hugged the dog and cried.

In the morning, she remembered what the old timers had told her. "They get frightened when they know somebody is rivering for them. They seem to have no control over themselves. They're irresistibly drawn to those things of the flesh, but they don't want to be. They'll fool with your mind. Pay no attention. It's just trickery, is all it is, it's just trickery. Stay calm and keep rivering."

In the early morning, she caught another one, and she noticed that her little block of dry ice would last two more days at the most. Then she would have to go to town, make her phone calls, ship the slivers to their owners and buy another block of ice.

At noon, she caught Roger.

When his sliver was safely frozen, tied inside the leather pouch, and resting with the other two on the ice inside the cooler, Deborah sat down on the beach, elbows on her knees, face in her hands. She didn't know what to do with him now that she had him.

And who said these things were their souls, anyway?

She knew what the old timers said. They said the souls were waiting for Release, a periodic occurrence when all the souls went on to their next assignment—whatever that was—all at the same time. Meanwhile, they were stored inconspicuously and economically as little pieces of solid light in the rivers.

So if Roger was in the cooler, would he go on to his next assignment from wherever he was, or would he miss out?

She picked up the cooler and ran to the van. She threw all her camping gear in, called the dog, slammed the door shut and went in to town.

At the first pay phone, she stopped, got out her address book, and made her calls. First was to Seiji Okano.

"Mr. Okano?"

"Yes?"

"This is Deborah Whittington. The Riverer. I have your sliver."

"You do?"

"Yes."

A long sigh on the other end. "That's wonderful."

"I'll ship it to you today. It will be packed in dry ice."

"That's fine."

She verified the address. "Um, Mr. Okano?"

"Yes?"

"What will you do with it?"

"Stir fry."

"Eat it?"

"Yes."

"Tell me, will that keep her from going on, I mean to the next..."

Mr. Okano hung up without answering.

She called the next person. A woman. "I have your sliver."

"Oh." She did not seem pleased.

"Don't you want it?"

"Oh, yes...I guess I do."

"I can release it."

"No! Please don't."

"I'll send it to you today, packed in dry ice."

"Fine."

"Do you mind my asking... What will you do with it?"

"I don't know yet. Keep it. Somehow."

"I see. Thank you."

Deborah hung up, then tended to the business of shipping the two and re-icing Roger.

She stopped in the local diner for a hamburger and a beer, but the waitress wouldn't serve her. "You're that riverer come to town, ain'tcha?"

"Yes."

"Take your business somewhere else, missy," she said, then turned her back.

"That's not exactly neighborly, Ginnie," a grey-haired police officer scolded her.

"Ain't Christian," Ginnie said in rebuttal, and as Deborah had noted the name Ginnie's Diner on the menu, she figured that Ginnie could refuse service to whoever she wanted.