

The Femme Fatale Hypothesis

David R. Roth

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David R. Roth's captivating novel *The Femme Fatale Hypothesis* involves a curious friendship between Kelsey and Rose Geddes and their next-door neighbor, June. The Geddeses are an elderly couple dealing with Rose's terminal cancer, while middle-aged June is a widow. Separated by a patch of greenery, these neighbors become unexpected partners in a struggle for life, death, and self-determination.

A retired professor, Kelsey is now Rose's caretaker. With courtly devotion, he prepares special meals to tempt his wife's appetite and helps manage her daily routines and medications. Kelsey also tries to continue his entomological research, but often finds himself unable to focus, even when holed up within his "sarcophagus" of a home office. Kelsey seems befuddled, but his mind is brilliant, despite troubling signs of encroaching dementia.

June is a nurturer who's still mourning the sudden loss of her husband. After her son moves to California, she feels untethered. She offers to visit Rose more often, trying to ease Kelsey's caretaking burden. Frail Rose retains her keen edge and refuses to be vanquished by disease—or at least not until she is ready to die.

In the neighbors' leafy Pennsylvania suburb, hourly church bells create a rhythm for each day. As June spends more time with the couple, a dark, teasing parallel develops between reality and Kelsey's academic research. Fascinated by the praying mantis, Kelsey notes how even a sickly female specimen can attract a mate by boosting her "sex pheromone production over that of her fatted rivals." And Rose soon experiences a slight but noticeable improvement in health. She becomes jealous of June, and more territorial toward her surroundings. Then, like his beloved, fateful mantis, Rose lures Kelsey into her final plan for them both.

With emotion, intellect, and sinuous finesse, *The Femme Fatale Hypothesis* leads to an unnerving yet fulfilling conclusion.

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