



THAT TIME I LOVED YOU

By Carriane Leung

215 pp. Liveright. \$24.95.



All but the last story title in Leung's new collection could be a clue in a Winner's Circle category on Dick Clark's "The \$25,000 Pyramid": "Grass," "Flowers," "Fences" — things you find in a neighborhood!

It's 1979 and in a grass-is-always-greener community, parents are killing themselves.

A softball coach blows his head off in his basement, a housewife guzzles bleach in her garage, a stay-at-home mom hangs herself in her bathroom and a drunk drinks himself to death on his couch. And there's a thief. Someone has stolen clothespins, scissors, a napkin ring and a garden spade. What the heck is happening behind closed doors? Well, let me tell you: a lot.

Each linked story has a secret. Yes, there's an affair, but what's going on with Grandma's wigs? Why doesn't that teenager want to go to her uncle's house? That lady is stress-eating *what*? Hold the rotary phone, can those primroses *talk*? In my favorite story, "Treasure," the neighborhood wives discover that their matriarch has been doing more than bedazzle in her hobby room. But here's the joyful surprise: What she feared would make her husband leave her makes her husband love her more.

This book is about love — between men and women, between parents and children — but most of all it's about the love of fresh starts. Mixed in with the Farrah Fawcett-lookalike neighbors, the subdivision is populated by immigrants. For these first-generation families, success is a garden, good grades and a top-of-the-line Hoover. Casseroles are a cure-all. Lemon Pledge is an aphrodisiac. Privacy is the greatest luxury, but through picture windows, everybody spies.

As if channeled by Gladys Kravitz and Charlie's Angels, Leung's stories read like the juiciest verified gossip.

SING TO IT

By Amy Hempel

149 pp. Scribner. \$25.



Hempel writes beautifully here about terrible things: death-row dogs and depression; miscarriage, murder, molestation and Mariah Carey. These are great stories about good dogs and bad apples. A poodle is a comfort, a retriever is a savior and, in "Moonbow," a pet is reincarnated as a small,

playful backyard brown bear after he was put down because he bit "that awful deliveryman who had it coming." There are a lot of awful men in this book: They turn up uninvited; they break in; they threaten lives with knives; they bury secrets in gardens. And then they offer their tainted fruit like a treat.

So how does a woman survive her poisoned decisions? Hempel answers with "Cloudland." You move. Try Florida. You watch out for snakes. You get a new job. Something simple. Care for the elderly. You live alone and do penance in a rundown house. You tolerate aggressive neighbors. You subscribe to catalogs that haunt you. You daydream about a family that you will never have on a boat on a lake without flies, mosquitoes, sunburn or seasickness.

Or you try for revenge.

In my favorite story, "Greed," a woman spies on her husband, who is having an affair with a much older married woman. How much older? She's been married 40 years, looks like his mother, has "work" done and wears low heels, and gives him photos of herself dressed in old-fashioned bathing suits. The narrator's husband is a serial adulterer, but Mrs. Greed is the first lover he will not give up. So the narrator, a children's speech therapist, hires a hit on the well-preserved old bag by thugish teenagers who "needed m-m-money."

This touch with the stutter is why I love Hempel's writing. With one word, she makes a judgment about every character involved, and no matter how harsh that word, I'm compelled to take her side.

AERIALISTS

By Mark Mayer

290 pp. Bloomsbury. \$26.



Mayer's book is set up like a circus at which the most relatable performer is a serial killer clown. In "The Clown," a middle-aged divorced man takes pride in his work. As a real-estate agent, he wears a blazer and slacks, and pairs the perfect property with the perfect couple. As a murderer, he wears

a bruised strawberry wig made of real hair and porcelain filed teeth, and fantasizes about chemically flaying or smothering a victim with his own scalp. But like any man who's good at his job, he knows who he is: a clown with a knife. And as in any good love story, he finds a woman who will let him be himself: a clown with a knife. It's frightfully romantic.

In the rest of the stories, characters struggle to connect. And what's scary are the regular people.

A girl befriends the surviving half of a pair of Siamese twins once joined at the brain like "cookies baked together," but is more disturbed by her Sunk Dad, a manic-depressive widower who threatens suicide via cassette tape. A man is seduced by a woman who's turned on by a mountain lion, but the lion turns out to have been tamed by a meth-town breeder and the woman wants to be hunted because she's into rape role-play. The residents of a small town have disappeared, but that mystery is overshadowed by a man mutilating a dead elephant with a peach knife, an old saw, a pick and his bare hands, only to abandon the "taller than a circus tent" carcass to be eaten by maggots.

Loneliness permeates the book. In one basement, a man spends his life building a train set, but has no one to inherit it. In another basement, a man hoards food and makes plans for a revolution that will never come. In a meditation loft, a mother hides from her husband and son. Fractured families try to find a heart in their homes.

HELEN ELLIS is the author, most recently, of "Southern Lady Code," a collection of essays.