

THE FORMER OCCUPANTS

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The ancient twins stood shoulder to shoulder at her doorstep, indistinguishable from each other right down to the matching salmon sport coats, as if in all their years they had never abandoned the habit of dressing alike. Later, she was unable to remember their names, even to recall which one had explained their presence, that they were in town for a seventieth high-school reunion, that they wanted to see their boyhood home. They must have mentioned where they now lived, but she could not bring that back, either, just the image of their grey eyes, lusterless as lead slugs, peering past her into the hallway. Had she invited them in? She could not remember it, but how else would they have wound up in her living room, spotted hands clutching glasses of lemonade she herself had poured, bald heads haloed by dust motes in the late afternoon sunlight? She was a hospitable woman, after all, still proud of the house where she had lived for 48 years, where she had raised a family, where she had chosen to remain in widowhood, despite her children's urgings to give the old place up. And if she was later to regret the men's visit, she knew that at the time her only misgivings were over unwashed dishes and unpolished furniture. No, she had *wanted* to show them the house,

to let them see the life she and her late husband made for themselves, the kitchen they gutted and remodeled three times, the mantelpiece they stripped down to its original wood, the oak bookshelves they built by hand, now overstuffed with yellowed paperbacks and photos of their children and children's children, the whole clan so spread out these days that they rarely came together under the same roof, even more rarely *this* roof. Not that she shared such worries with her visitors, leading them from room to room with the practiced cordiality of a tour guide, their impassive eyes studying her from beneath thick white brows as whorled as barbed wire.

She had almost finished taking them through the first floor before it dawned on her that she was the only one talking, that whatever had brought them here, it was not to trade memories of the place. Outside the kitchen, their pace slowed, their eyes shooting from wall to wall as if they had suddenly lost their way. The back staircase, one of them said. What happened to the staircase? She had not expected the accusation in his voice, the anger on his face, and even as she explained how her husband had ripped those stairs out to make room for a second bathroom, even as she regaled them with a funny story about how inept he was as a plumber, how to this day you had to turn on the cold water if you wanted a hot shower and vice versa, she realized those men viewed the renovation as an act of vandalism, saw her as a trespasser in *their* house. She began to wish that they had never knocked on her door, that she was still napping in front of the television, another dull day fading into another dull night. She had been too eager to let them in, she told herself. Was she that desperate for company? She should get out of the house more, meet new people, perhaps do some volunteer work—73 was not that old, after all. Look at these cadaverous pests, still climbing on planes, showing up uninvited at strangers' doors, while her life just trickled on like that endlessly running toilet she'd been meaning to fix for years, its serpentine hiss now trailing her down the hallway. Wake alone, bathe alone, eat alone, go to bed alone—it wasn't so bad, really, just as long as you never stopped to think about it, never bothered to wonder if that was all there would ever be—wake alone, bathe alone, eat alone, go to bed alone. No. It had to change. She would stop procrastinating, shake things up, sit right down and come up with a plan the very minute she could get rid of these

senile leeches. But for the moment, propriety permitted no escape, not for her and not for them, so she marched her guests back through the dining room, the living room, the front hall, shadows hardening in the dusk.

The brothers panted slowly up the stairs behind her, past restored photos of her late husband's ancestors, unsmiling figures about whom she knew almost nothing but now found herself making up names and stories, here's Great Uncle William who operated a feed lot in South Dakota, there's Cousin Jake who sold Studebakers, embarrassed by these lies yet suddenly determined to deny the newcomers any claim on her walls. On a normal day, she might have felt self-conscious about the clutter of the second floor, the rooms she kept meticulously clean without ever managing to throw anything out, but now every random piece of the past, her daughter's jettisoned law-school textbooks, her husband's amateurish watercolor paintings of the pond down the street, her youngest son's trombone, its case latched shut for the last twenty years, seemed to offer protection against these intruders. They looked otherworldly in the half-light, their pale skin incandescent, their sport coats making her think of ushers at the ballpark from when she was a girl, pretzel salt on her tongue and cigar smoke in the air, no thought of it in years, those Sunday doubleheaders with her father, long dead, and her big brother, dead, too, the past suddenly so luminous and vivid she didn't even need to close her eyes to see it. And now those ushers were taking her by each arm and escorting her down the dark stairway, lifting her off the ground, their strength amazing, their bony fingers dug deep into her skin, and she wondered why she didn't fight them, didn't scream, didn't even look back at the house as they led her out into the twilight. And when she shot back out of this waking dream she saw that she was still on the second-floor landing, the twins now staring at something amid the knick-knacks on a hallway shelf.

She followed their eyes to a tiny amber bottle, an antique her husband, an inveterate junk collector, had dug up while gardening. For once the men did not keep up with her as she gestured them toward the stairs but stood gazing at that bottle, one of them whispering inaudibly, the other with a faint grin on his lips, the first time either man had smiled since entering the house. And now the smiling one was clutching the bottle, holding it out for his brother to examine. She rushed to them and snatched

it away, flushing at her lack of composure, her unexpected covetousness over some trinket she had all but forgotten, no bigger than the palm of her hand. Tipping it to the lamplight, she noticed how fragile it was, honeycombed with hairline cracks, and then she realized she had never bothered to read the raised lettering: *Dr. Gibson's Tonic Elixir/The Balm of Life/Cures Headaches, Rheumatism, All Ills*. When she turned back to the brothers she was surprised to find their eyes meeting hers warmly, as if the bottle had somehow softened their opinion of her. Our mother, said one, used to keep that snake oil in the medicine cabinet. Stunk to high heaven. To high heaven, said the other. Like turpentine. And then they were laughing, their throats seething, their pale eyes glassy with joy.

Later, after her eldest son had finally convinced her to move into an independent living facility in his town, she often told herself how easy it would have been, and how kind, to let those men have the thing they were seeking, a proof that their past was not lost. But at the moment, staring into those faces and listening to that hissing laughter, she squeezed the bottle tight, as if to let it go would be to surrender the whole house. It was not until after the former occupants had teetered back down the stairs and taken their leave that she realized the bottle had broken in her palm—no sound, no blood, no pain, no sensation at all, just a faint glittering of shattered glass in the last light of day.