

## WHAT THE HOUSE KNOWS

by Nancy Branka

“I could carry you over the threshold.”

“Too old and fat for that,” she said. He laughed. After 30 years, they had a kind of call-and-response that suited them.

He turned the key in the lock, then stood back to look up—the neatly tuck-pointed brick, the eyebrow dormers, and the cheerful windows spanned the first floor. “Can’t believe this beauty is ours.” He put his arm around her shoulders.

What would Helen have thought, these retirees dressed in Dockers and Talbots invading? The house knew the truth of it. This was her domain, Helen’s and Richard’s (well, until he left her). She had refined it over twenty years to perfection, like a painter adding a brushstroke here and there, standing back, adding another, putting the finishing touches on what would eventually be her masterpiece. Now it was theirs.

Their furniture wouldn’t arrive for two more weeks. In the meantime, the husband and wife unloaded a card table and two folding chairs from the car’s trunk, carried them in the front door, and set up a central command post in the kitchen, spending daylight hours there, mostly on their laptops.

The only other chair in the house was a leather wingback left behind from the estate sale, where Helen used to read romance novels every afternoon in front of the fireplace. She’d curl up, tiny thing, cozy under a mohair plaid blanket that warded off the winter chill, and the air conditioning the rest of the year. The house basked in coziness.

But the husband and wife didn’t know any of that. These people turned the chair to face the expanse of windows into the backyard and would occasionally sit in it for just a moment, as

if to survey their estate, before returning to the folding chairs at the kitchen card table. The wingback remained all by itself in the broadness of the living room, echoes bouncing up and down and around from the bare oak floors.

Over these weeks, the husband and wife were giddy over the house, but sheepish. Like teenagers with a crush, wanting to burst open, but fearful the love may be unrequited. The kind of giddiness that was embarrassing to watch.

Some days the wife would stand at the kitchen door, staring into the yard. She fixated on the hummingbird feeder, which swayed slightly in the breeze from its shepherd hook. Yet she never voiced what she must have been thinking: "Why are there no hummingbirds?" Nor did she even once venture across the grass to where it hung and check that its sugared water remained. Once when a ray of sun lit it up like neon, she said with disapproval, "The color of that feeder, could it be any more red?"

She would never know the feeder was Helen's obsession. That Helen tended it with the care of a mother for a newborn. And when she wasn't reading romances, Helen talked to the hummingbirds. "Ah, you little one. When do you get to rest? How weary those fairy wings must be."

Helen herself had been nicknamed "Little Hummingbird" by her grandmother, she'd told Peter, the widower across the street, once. As a child, Helen was half the size of her peers, delicate and wan.

By contrast, the wife had more the build of a Canadian goose. It was hard to imagine she would have a connection to the hummingbirds, were they ever to return. Perhaps she would instead dote on the pair of mourning doves that nested just beyond the fence, often coo-cooing, and only occasionally getting enough lift to flutter onto the roof.

Finally, the furniture arrived. Three dark men with sweaty muscles that gleamed in the afternoon light ferried boxes, sofas, sections of tables, and more boxes in through the wide-open front door, never speaking. The husband stood like a traffic director in the foyer, pointing and instructing. Upstairs. Office. Little bedroom. Kitchen. On and on, as the house filled.

Meanwhile, the wife scurried about the kitchen, unfurling coffee mugs from their paper wrappings, lining them up just so in the cabinet above where she planned the fancy coffee machine would go. "Please let the coffee machine arrive in one piece," she whispered under her breath. As each box emptied, she whisked the remains to the mountain of recyclables in the garage, making room for the next box.

The husband never moved from his position in the foyer, but she was here and there, from one box to another, peeling back the sheets of paper that so carefully protected the glasses, Corning Ware, and measuring cups. In they would go to the tentatively assigned cabinets or a shelf in the pantry. Then another trip to the garage to dispose of an armload of cardboard and paper.

It was while she alphabetized—only roughly—an array of spices in the pantry that something caught her eye, a little patch of dulled red in a crevice behind the shelf she planned for the KitchenAid mixer. She stepped towards it, curious, and touched it, first gingerly, then with a tug. A passport. "Oh my," she said. "Khelen Popova? She was Russian?"

Why Helen hid the passport in the pantry during her mother's final visit, or why she hid it all, was a mystery, even to the house. Her mother did that to her, stirred her up. She subsequently forgot about the passport, or so it would seem. Of course, Helen became an American citizen when she was still a child, so this relic was meaningless. By the end of her life, her origins were a secret from all, tucked away in that pantry.

What the husband and wife didn't know was that two other remnants of Helen's life remained in the house. Hidden in the back of the bathroom vanity was a black claw-like hair clip, no longer needed—her hair was never the same after those rounds of chemo, and she kept it short for the last years.

In the kitchen, a champagne cork lay wedged under the refrigerator, popped from the bottle she drank alone to celebrate her divorce. Both were missed by the realtor's house cleaner. Eventually, the husband and wife would, of course, discover these artifacts and toss them in the garbage with mild disgust, unaware of their significance.

Still in the pantry, the wife called to the husband. "I found something!" When he came to see, she held out the open passport. "Look at this. Helen was Russian."

As he examined it, the wife puzzled out the math. Finally, she said, "If I'm reading the birth date right, Helen was 68 when she died."

To those who knew her, to those who watched how she walked through the world, how she carried herself even when no one was looking, she had seemed younger than 68. Even the paramedic said, "This one better be a fighter, because she's too young to go," when he found her unconscious on the bedroom carpet, phone in her hand. "Pity someone couldn't have been here to help her," he said as he ripped the top buttons from her silk pajamas to begin CPR.

The wife pulled her hand back, still holding that passport. "I think she was in her late 60s or something like that."

She stopped a moment, fingers at her lips, then asked, "Do you think she could have died in our bedroom?" It was a quiet worry that, until then, had not been voiced.

The husband's silent shrug said that this had occurred to him, too, but that he was unwilling to entertain the thought. He returned to the business of directing and moving their life inside the four walls.

A week later, the neighbor across the street introduced himself to the husband as they both took in their empty garbage cans. He was Peter. Lived in the neighborhood for fifteen years. Originally from Alabama. The husband invited Peter in for a glass of wine.

Peter had been a frequent visitor in the house, often asked by Helen to help with this or that, he said. What he didn't say was that sometimes they'd just sit and talk, share a smoke. He said, as the wife poured him a glass of Cabernet, that he was the one who installed the toilet in the powder room when she'd gotten exasperated with the contractor. Peter couldn't stand to see her agitated. He had spent many an hour in this house, sitting in the living room by those backyard windows but in a different chair.

For the three of them—Peter, the husband, the wife—to be in the house, cordially drinking wine on chairs new to the living room, sent an almost imperceptible vibration in motion.

The husband and wife were unaware, though. They were like new characters thrown into a lengthy manuscript by the novelist, just to see how they would disrupt the plot. If they'd known more about the past, they might not have invited Peter in.

After the conversation wandered around the usual neighborly topics—the best hours for golf, the status of the mayor's race, and the house fire a few miles away that had burned a sheriff's cruiser—the wife asked, "What was Helen like?"

It broke a seal. All three took a sip of wine, easing into the answer. Peter turned to look out the window, past the yard, towards something that made him smile. The wife followed his gaze but saw nothing.

Leaning back, Peter finally said in his slight southern drawl, "She was a lovely woman."

That was all. The husband and wife looked at each other.

"She was a lovely woman," Peter repeated, still with that faraway look.

For those who knew her, it was perfectly phrased. Yet the husband and wife seemed perplexed, not sure what to make of it. Peter shook his head with a slight smile again, like he'd just had a taste of French silk pie. He patted his knees, then rose. "I'm sorry but I need to get home. The dog goes nuts if I don't feed him at 6:00 on the dot."

They watched Peter's back as he crossed the street, then closed their own door and locked it. The husband looked at the wife. She nodded and poured them each another glass of wine. Taking their seats again, they sat in silence, looking out into the yard as the sky darkened until not even the hummingbird feeder could be seen.

"I've heard burning sage can be helpful for this kind of thing. To clear spirits," the wife said finally. The husband nodded before turning back to gaze into the darkness.

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