

The Hag's Reflection

It was Janet's bushes I noticed first. Usually they'd be so prim, pruned with sparks of vivid red on thorny stems poking out in a way that seemed simultaneously erratic, and harmonious. But now, there were no roses, just a bulging mass of yellowing leaves. The stark contrast of it struck a physical blow to my stomach. I'd always been painfully envious of them, of how effortlessly she'd maintained them, but never did I imagine their absence to upset me like this.

I started to sweat, feeling that tickling, rashy heat invade my body with nothing but complete conquest as goal. Looking around, I began to panic. It wasn't just the bushes. Other things, near everything had been altered. Tim's birdbath was gone, an eyesore it was – uneven planks and poor paint job - but he made it himself and was proud beyond measure. Ilene's wall of ivy that crept up the face of the entire house, keeping the pebble-dashed wall a secret, but admitting the windows has been lifted; not a hint of forest green in sight. Maggie and Tom's black and gold gates were now short and aggressive, boasting a garish orange. And this, and that, and-

I took a moment, to just give pause and allow a confluence of thought. Just to process. I breathed in, difficult as it was all of a sudden, letting the cool chill of the air try to diffuse the sweats from within. There *had* to be a simple explanation. Perhaps I'd turned on the wrong street? They do look very similar, all built around the same time many years ago. That had to be it. Yes! I was just walking back from-

From...

From...?

For the life of me, I couldn't remember what I'd been doing.

Why I was outside. Where I was coming from. I couldn't even mentally pin what day it was in my head. I had no bags to indicate shopping, my little Peter wasn't in tow so it wasn't the school run. Big Peter, my Peter, must have picked- a sudden lurch roared in my stomach; it felt as if my gut had shot out and snapped back. It threw me back a few steps, until I braced myself by throwing my leg back – and the ache of such an action was immense.

I howled, but instead, I heard another voice. The same agony, the same confusion. I looked around, admittedly disgruntled, but to my surprise, no-one else was on the unfamiliar street. Just me. Just- my heart skipped a beat. I was straining to see- moreso than usual. My eyes were never primed for detail, blurriness had been a forced friend of mine since I was fifteen, but I realised now a big part of why the street looked so different was because there was a strange pale limn. Like a foggy filter pulled before me. But, on my search for the source of this phantom voice, I saw the door number on the house nearest to me – a white marble '*fifty-seven*' with three blue birds, or perhaps they were twin-leaved flowers, hovering above it.

This *was* my street.

I tried to control my breathing, the way you're taught to – though who gives us the lesson is anybody's guess. Paddle them from the shallow end of panic to the deep calm, but it was artificial, unhelpful. I tried to pick up the pace, my house was *seventy-three* so it was easily within reach. But my legs, they didn't have the strength enough to propel me forward. It was like forcing myself through the foul treacle of a dream, on hollow trunks that half listened to my wishes.

The world bleared from tears, but I blinked the stinging wetness away. As soon as I was home, I could fall on to the couch and just give in to the overwhelming sensation. That's all I needed, a moment to rest. I forced myself forward trying to ignore the gnawing taunts of irregularity; *ugly gnomes gone, pastel pink and yellow pavestones now suffocated by a blanket of grass, no dog napping on doorstep.*

Then I got to my house, and- I can't even put it in to words. It felt like someone had reached down my throat, and yanked raggedly at my beating heart, inverting my entire body, mind and soul inside out.

My- *my house*- It was... The garden was- My walls- My windows- My door... *different*. I fumbled with the strange latch on the alien gate, unable to peel my eyes away from the edifying unfamiliarity. My stomach was whooshing with anxious vomit, ready to tumble and erupt like a volcano of vexation.

Nonplussed, almost like a moth fluttering about a biting flame, I was compelled to approach although I wanted to just disappear, the scorching bewilderment almost too much to endure. Small bursts of green were mocking me from the ground- they were never allowed to see the light of day. I was furious with Peter, whatever he'd done- whatever-

I reached the door, and cocked my head to the side, as if doing so would help me process the tilted world – the action of which shot a crackling jolt of pain through my aching body. I placed my hand against the door; my door... What should be a maroon wood, sanded and varnished so it was smooth as marble was now a mud-flecked, dirt-dappled white plastic – two hideous stained glass windows gawping at me like gormless eyes, with a copper plated and wonky '73'. I placed my hand against it, and traced it, hoping that the physical sensation would strike a modicum of sense within me, but it didn't.

I gripped the handle, though my hand felt weak with the sudden displacement of everything, and tried to pull down but it was fixed, stubborn. *Peter wouldn't do this without asking*, is all I could hold on to.

I heard a noise from within the- *my house* – a high-pitched squeal that bore through my skull - and then navigated my way off the strange door step, which was difficult for such a simple task, past the large brown pot with a small shoot protruding, and over to where the patch of unkempt grass rushed in to the bricks below the window, lapping up like a stilled and silent verdant wave. I knew I oughtn't, but I couldn't resist. I had to look inside- to see.

The knot I'd been feeling in my throat bulged, making it even more difficult to breathe. My heart shattered; a thousand razor shards exploding like shrapnel and digging in to my coveted memories. If the outside aesthetic was a whole new world to me, the inside was a different universe. Everything I'd collected over time, the cabinets I'd procured, the paintings I'd fell in love with and paid more than we could afford for, the clock I'd allowed Peter to hang even though it went with nothing, and even the constant clutter of little Peter's toys – they were gone. Not only gone, but- replaced, without gentle care or fanfare. Nowhere in sight. I felt, magnified beyond reference, that sensation of thinking there was an extra step to go... like getting in to a warm bath and finding yourself in an arctic tundra.

And my eyes focused on the pinnacle of incongruity.

Where my (faux-)Persian rug usually sat, on a now soulless dark wood slatted floor, sat two young girls. Though their backs were to me, I knew instantly that I'd never seen them before in my life- but there they were, in my home. Sitting, playing, giggling and shrieking with joy and laughter.

My vision blurred again. From the pale filter, from the burning tears, from the incomprehensible shirking of reality that had been brutally torn from beneath me. And, as I regained focus, my entire body shuddered with a crucifying fear.

I didn't notice her a moment ago, but staring right back at me from within – transparent as a spectre – was the visage of a deranged hag. Haunting, harrowed and hollow. Her hair a shock of wiry, greyed, crackling briar. A face that had been tortured by years, pilfering the youth and leaving cruel leathery wrinkles in their stead. A toothless, lined mouth that yammered

nonsensically. But those eyes, wide and drenched in horror – drowning in kindred dismay. So familiar, so strange. She seemed to be almost as terrified to be looking out at me, as I was to be looking in at her. At the exact same time I did, she let out a scream of dread, and I realised now where the sound I heard before had come from. Her! This old woman in *my* house. Beneath her ragged, weak scream I could hear the girls from within, filling the world with their own – staring out, through her, at me, before scrambling away.

The world began to vignette and darken around the rims of my sight. Standing was difficult. I couldn't stabilise myself on the shelf beneath the windows. Before me, fading, the world turned, tossed in tumult, and tumbled a montage of mayhem from hag, to house, to pale blue sky until I felt a hard and painful *thud* as something rushed without herald and whacked me from behind.

The hag's screaming ceased, but inside – as the cotton clouds skated above the cool blue – I could hear those invader girl's crying. And then, nothing.

I lulled in and out of consciousness. My eyes flickering open for fractions of a second at a time. I could hear a half-familiar voice sounding angry; furious, even. Tidbits of understanding filtered through, but the context was lost on me. A whole hubbub about costs and security, falls and concussions at 'such an age'. Other voices; cowed, timid, apologetic. But nothing about the home invasion. In and out of coherency I sailed, like a boat rocking on placid waters. At one point, when I felt a little more stable, I was given something tasteless to swallow and then the world slipped once more, but this time, without the anguish.

Perhaps it was the same day, perhaps it was a month, a week – I couldn't guess. But I woke, in a strange room. I looked around, trying to digest the sudden change. The room itself seemed bare, and plain, but there were a few home comforts that anchored me. Prized pictures nestled in favourite frames, oh, and my doll I'd had since I was a baby, and- and-

An icy chill took hold of me.

There was someone there. Their silhouette looked vaguely familiar, but also like someone I'd never met. I tried to force a question, but all that spilled from my shivering mouth was a croak. It was enough to grab their attention.

They turned to look at me. So strange. So odd. Ethereal. It was my husband, Peter, somehow looking exactly like himself, yet decidedly different. He looked both older and younger in a strange way. He stared at me, and I noticed he'd done away with the gruff little beard he'd always wear. I smiled, finally happy that there was something I could make some sense of. I tried to ask what had happened, but again, all that poured forth was a jilted, staccato rattle. Though, my Peter, he always knew what I wanted before I had to say it.

He took my hand, though his grip was a little weaker than he'd usually exact. "Don't worry," he said, soothing and placating – a strange, affected, tone to his voice that I couldn't quite discern. I felt him rubbing a gentle, loving circle on the back of my hand. That was new. I liked it. Then, "You had another episode, Mum."

Mum.

Mum...?

But...

For the slightest moment, a fraction of a fraction of a fraction of a millisecond, there was a hint of remembrance, then a sudden plummet of fear.

I pulled my hand back, staring at the face looking down at me... *hopeful*, it seemed.

It was difficult, but I managed to speak.

"Wh- who are you?"

The man's glimmer of hope dulled, and he sighed, *defeated*.