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SIPSWORTH

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For Joshua and his father, Dale.

OVERTURE

Helen Cartwright was old with her life broken in ways she could not have foreseen.

Walking helped, and she tried to go out every day, even when it poured. But life for her was finished. She knew that and had accepted it. Each day was an impersonation of the one before with only a slight shuffle – as though even for death there is a queue.

Not a single person who glimpsed her bony figure flapping down Westminster Crescent could say they knew her. She was simply part of a background against which their own lives rolled unceasingly on. In truth, Helen Cartwright was native to the place – born in the old Park Hospital while her father fought at sea. The hospital was long gone, but the brick cottage where Helen had grown up was still there. Now and again she walked that way into town. The front garden had been paved over, but cracks in the cement sometimes bled flowers she could name, as though just below the surface of this world are the ones we remember, still going on.

Her home now was a detached pensioner's cottage with a mustard door. She had purchased it through the internet after living abroad for sixty years.

A lot can happen in six decades. A place can change. But she hadn't changed.

Helen realised that the moment she had gotten out of the airport taxi and stood before the new house on Westminster Crescent. The home she had given up on the other side of the world would have other people by now. She imagined them unrolling leaves of newspaper to reveal objects that were important or fragile, but in truth were just links in a chain that led you back to the beginning.

No, she hadn't changed at all.

She simply knew more because of all the things she had been through. And contrary to the fairy tales told to her at bedtime as a child, anything of value she had returned home with was invisible to anyone but herself.

After the taxi chugged back to Heathrow, Helen had gone inside and dropped her luggage at the foot of the stairs. Like all houses, this place had its own smell that would disappear once she was used to it. On the hall floor beside her feet were letters addressed to someone she didn't know. She wondered about the people who had been here before. Tried to imagine their lives but kept returning to the husband and son, now far beyond her reach.

Still wearing her coat with the scent of aircraft cabin and coins forever loose in the seam, Helen walked through the kitchen and stood in the empty living room.

Stared out the front window.

A hundred times as a girl, she must have run, skipped, or ridden her clanking bike past this house. A hundred

times as a girl, without ever thinking it a place she would return one day, to close her life in a perfect circle.

On her eightieth birthday, Helen spent the day moving things in the kitchen cupboard. Wiping down shelves. Vacuuming the stairs. Turning from any face that appeared in the dust or the darkness between cans.

Three years pass with nothing to fill their pockets.

Then early one morning, something happens.

FRIDAY

1.

It is past midnight, but still so dark, day cannot yet be separated from night. Helen Cartwright is standing at the bedroom window in nightdress and slippers. Has nudged the curtain just enough to see a world emptied by the smallness of the hour. Unable to sleep, she is about to go downstairs and put the television on, when something moves. She bends to the cold glass but loses the street in a sudden flower of breath. It clears to reveal a neighbour in robe and slippers, laden with black bags for the early-morning waste collection. Helen watches him drop his load then return to the house. Instead of locking his side gate, he props it open with a brick, then wobbles out with a large box, which he sets down on the nest of plastic bags with great care.

Over the past several months, Helen has become curious about what people throw away. Several times she has even gone out to inspect the mounds of bags for an interesting bulge – some object mistakenly tossed before its time. A

hollow clunk is usually an item of wood; a delicate rattle means porcelain. Anything that sloshes is to be avoided.

And so after the neighbour has latched the side gate and locked his door, Helen steps into her tartan slippers and goes downstairs. Ensuring there is no one outside, she pulls on her coat and drops into the stomach of night. It must have been raining, for the street is like soft, damp ribbon. Helen doesn't mess with any bags. She goes straight to the large box her neighbour had been carrying, which isn't a box at all. It is a glass fish tank full of rubbish. Nothing special – except for what lies on top. A child's toy Helen has seen before – a prop from the life she has outlived, some piece of her memory that has somehow broken off and found its way back into her shaking hands.

The shape and feeling of the toy make Helen wonder if she is, in fact, upstairs in her bed sleeping soundly – and that moments later will open both eyes to the milky stillness of her room. She lets her gaze travel from the discarded object down the long row of houses on Westminster Crescent, as though a light, or a door, or the neighbour's cat might appear and break the skin of dreaming.

But nothing moves.

No one comes.

The gowned women and pyjamared men of the street are the ones doused in slumber, not her. She alone brings consciousness to the moment.

Helen turns the item over. A plastic deep-sea diver. Touches the air tank and flippers. Behind the diving mask two painted eyes seem to recognise her. She had bought the very same thing for her son's thirteenth birthday. Then it had been part of a set. She wonders what could be in all

the small cardboard boxes underneath. Perhaps this one is part of a set, too, and the pieces will appear, one by one, as if gathered in by the long whiskers of grief.

Without thinking, she bends, heaves up the fish tank with its toy diver and dirty cardboard boxes. It's heavier than Helen has imagined, and though it isn't far to the house, halfway back, a seam of cloud opens. Everything in the aquarium is soon soaked. Water snakes down Helen's cheeks. Her head is vibrating with cold, and her hair feels sticky. There really isn't far to go – another fifteen metres – but the pooling drops increase her burden. And despite sinewy arms now swaying with strain, Helen is determined not to put the thing down. Inside, she can go through the contents and decide what to do. Memory has never come to her like this in the physical world. It has always been something weightless – strong enough to blow the day off course, but not something she can reach for and hold on to.

The weight of the fish tank with everything in it is not unlike the weight of a large child, and so she keeps on, powered by coals of instinct.

Getting the tank through the door is not easy and requires tilting. Fibres in her arms and neck writhe, and she waits for a ripping pain in her chest – but somehow there is strength left for this final test. Once in, she stumbles to the sitting room and drops the tank onto the coffee table with a thump.

After rubbing a tissue under her nose in the downstairs loo, Helen carries herself upstairs and sheds her sopping clothes. Draws a bath with a capful of eucalyptus. Lowers her shivering body into the melting water.

In warm, wet stillness she ponders the deep-sea diver she can now feel holding her entire life in place like an anchor dropped years ago and then forgotten. But for what purpose is she being held at the edge? Everyone she has ever loved or wanted to love is gone, and behind a veil of fear she wishes to be where they are.

Now there is an object downstairs trying to drag her back in – a child's toy that belongs to her memory as much as it belongs to the past of another.

This sort of thing was supposed to be over for her. There is nothing in the house even to look at. No birthday cards, no letters. Even photo albums were discarded for her big move three years before. She burned them, actually. In the driveway under the terrace. She had to. Even the one of a trip to New Zealand when David was nine and they'd sat as a family with ice creams on a low wall watching small boats make for the open sea, like children leaving home.

Helen can feel steam on her face like a pair of hands. Lets her head sink back into a rolled towel. Closes her eyes against the empty rooms of her home.

Without her, it could have been anybody's house.

There had been some furniture when she arrived. A bed frame, a chest of drawers, and a modern hall table with brass legs. Curtains and carpets were also in place. The rest of her things she purchased from a catalogue. Helen had watched as two men and a woman carried in the bundles, which then had to be unwrapped and put together. She had given the workers tea and a plate of biscuits, but sat most of the time upstairs so they could talk freely and work without feeling watched. In the early evening two of them carried out the discarded packaging. The other had started the lorry

and was sitting in it. On the doorstep, Helen offered something extra, in case they wanted a hot meal. There were many pubs in the town, and in the early hours of Saturday and Sunday morning, if Helen opened a window, she could hear singing or distant laughter like ripples on the surface of night.

When she was a girl, many people worked in the factories. There was one not far from her house on the other side of a canal. During her first year living on Westminster Crescent, Helen would listen for the noon whistle. But during the six decades of her absence, the place had been rased and the whistle hauled off in a pile of broken brick.

It wasn't easy coming back after so long. Everything had been going on without her as if she'd never existed. The outdoor market where her mother liked to chat with the fishmonger was now a place for cars. And where the stall had been stood a tall machine that took coins for parking. The shop near the school that stayed open late for people coming home from the factory was still there. But it looked and smelled different. The burgundy awning that flapped in winter had been replaced with a white plastic sign lit up from within. And there were several tills, not just the one that stood guard before a wall of gumdrops, licorice, and sherbet.

Returning after sixty years, Helen had felt her particular circumstances special: just as she had once been singled out for happiness, she was now an object of despair. But then after so many consecutive months alone, she came to the realisation that such feelings were simply the conditions of old age and largely the same for everybody. Truly, there was no escape. Those who in life had held back in matters of

love would end in bitterness. While the people like her, who had filled the corners of each day, found themselves marooned on a scatter of memories. Either way, for her as for others, a great storm was approaching. She could sense it swollen on the horizon, ready to burst. It would come and wash away even the most ordinary things, leaving no trace of what she felt had been hers.