

The Empty House

By Nick Hayden

Susanna's car rumbled down a long drive, dust billowing into golden clouds as she passed. Gilded trees arched overhead, rays of sunlight falling like water through their intertwined fingers. The driveway ran straight through the tunnel of trees, then turned suddenly to reveal a field of high grass that had once been a lawn, a pond green with algae, and an empty house.

She slowed and reluctantly put the car in park, leaning over the steering wheel to look at the house.

"It'll only take a second," she told herself.

She took off her sunglasses and put them neatly in her purse, then checked her hair and makeup in the mirror. Her heels tapped against the paved ground, and she shut the door.

She stood primly in her black slacks and gray blouse. Her blond hair hung halfway down her back. Though her friends sometimes commented that she still looked as good as she had in college, she knew she did not. Three days of exercise a week and an hour of beautification each morning did not balance the birth of four children or the passing of thirty years.

She walked the stone footpath to the door and took the key hidden beneath the cracked lawn gnome her father had loved. It still smiled, though gray pockmarks riddled its body.

Inside, the small foyer was dim and dusty. She could see the echo of footprints on the floor—her husband's. He had been here yesterday. She walked through the kitchen: though untouched, the appliances seemed as discarded pieces of trash. The hallway was dead and lifeless. But when she entered the living room, columns of light slanted through the wall of windows like fallen beams of some ancient building. The furniture

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still remained; she and her husband would auction it off in the coming weeks. As she scanned the room, she felt a shock of some emotion as she came upon his chair. It stood like a monument, like some sculptured Virgin Mary searching for her child, not knowing that he was in the temple.

She continued through this room as she had through the kitchen and hall, the spiritual giving way again to the mundane. She had seen none of the house for several years, just as she had not seen her father—tomorrow she would see him again. Her husband had continued to visit him in the nursing home; he had cleaned her father's room when he had died; she would attend the funeral.

She had been in the ruins of a castle once on a family vacation, trying to educate her children in history and architecture. The rooms and hallways felt like that to her now, stones amid grass and sun, cold stones that at times did not seem so, for the hands of men had made them and the lives of men had indwelt them.

She thought it proper and decent to have some of her father's writings at the viewing. It had been a hobby of his, although he had never been published. He had once tried because she had begged him to. But to him it was a bothersome affair to sell a piece of writing when he could give it to whomever he wished for free.

She entered his study and found the shelves and files of books and papers as she remembered them. She flipped through the notebooks, each dated by the day he had begun writing in it and by the day he had finished. He had dated everything: stories, poems, letters, notes, grocery lists. She chose some notebooks, some manuscripts, knowing which pieces those attending the viewing would most remember and appreciate. But the words were lifeless to her, like photographs of relatives she did not know. Her father had forgotten her as he had forgotten everything but his stories in his last years. From the day he could no longer remember her name, he had been dead to her—her tears had come and gone. She had no more.

When she had a healthy stack of papers and notebooks, she retrieved the list in her

purse and checked it against those in her arms. She exchanged a few, then turned to leave, but she stumbled over something she could not see, fell, and the papers flew everywhere, fluttering down like ashes in smoke.

She sat, cursing, and angrily tugged her blouse straight. A box lay in the middle of the floor. She kicked the box, then began to pick up the loose pages of the manuscripts, but they were not labeled and the stories ran one into another like the speech of a child. She screamed in frustration. She turned ferociously on the box and tore the taped flaps open. It contained the few things her husband had packed from her father's room in the nursing home. "How like a man to put it in the middle of the room!"

She began rummaging through the contents. "Yes, let's bring these and remember him as he was in the end!" She began to pull out the clothes, all worn and faded, from the box. "Ah, let them see him clothed in his madness!" He had taken to speaking nonsense and had mixed parts of stories he had written or heard with real-life. She continued scavenging through the box, tossing away trinkets and necessities. Then she stopped.

Several notebooks lay at the bottom, each with the inevitable dates. She shuffled through them—blue, black, red—the fourth was green, a single date inscribed on the front. The date was a little more than a week before his death.

She opened it. It was blank except for the first few pages, but scrawled at the top were the words, "Continued from previous." Susanna began to read:

"But where am I?" the girl asked, and as she looked about, the creatures came nearer still. She could see them more clearly now: they were like dogs with flat faces and big eyes, and they were very short. Or she had grown taller and they were not short at all. But that could not be, for the trees were much higher than she and she could not see the sky.

"You have come, you have come!" the creatures cried, and they stood on two legs and began to dance wonderfully. "Come, you must dance with us, for what has been

said has happened.”

And they danced near her feet, but she feared that if she too danced, she would step upon one and end it all. And as they danced, the trees above began to sway and swing, and between their clapping leaves, the wind sang.

“Come, come, dance with us.”

So wonderful did their dancing seem to the girl that she tried to join, but her feet were heavy and clumsy, and she felt squat like a rock or a tin plate, and she could not flow as the creatures did—and now about her were not only the strange things at her feet, but birds and squirrels and deer and bears and elephants and other creatures stranger and still more strange. But because she could not dance, she stopped and began to cry.

“Please, no more!” the creatures at her feet begged, and they fled from her tears. And, talking to one another, they asked, “Why can she not dance? Cannot everything dance?”

Then a great tree turned to her and lifted her by her head and flipped her upside down, so that all she had collected in her journeys fell from her pockets. “Where is it, little one? Where do you hide it?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” the girl said, looking into his dark, knotty eyes.

“Where is your stone?”

“I did not find one, and none was given me. Will any stone work? I will look for one.”

But the tree set her gently upon the ground. “No—there is but one stone for each of us,” and from deep within, through the bark, emerged a white stone from the tree’s trunk. He took it and held it up and he seemed to grow. All around, every beast and bird, every tree and leaf of grass, indeed, every living thing produced his stone, and to the girl they appeared together as one monstrous creature full of blank white eyes. But none of the creatures looked to her, for each looked instead at the back of his stone,

and she wondered what they saw.

“But where will I find one? I have accomplished my tasks, but I have never even seen one such as these.”

Then, as one, every living thing looked up and turned, and their stones returned to where they had been, and a silence rose like music, thick with depth and rich in orchestration, but it struck not her ears, but some organ or sense she had not known she possessed.

And into the clearing strode a tall and ancient man, if indeed he was a man, for his eyes were stars and his smile was the crescent moon; his cloak was dawn and day and dusk; his hair was moss and his beard hanging vines; his feet were stone and his face was fire and his hands were flesh.

“Have you brought me the items I have sent you for?”

The girl nodded and she picked up the things that had fallen from her pockets. She handed him the final page of the Endless Library and the splinter from the Root of the World and the grain of sand from the Desert of Ever. Taking these, the great man ate them, and when he opened his mouth again to speak, a white stone emerged and he gave it to the girl.

“This is yours and yours alone; with it you join every living thing.”

Trembling, she took the stone and looked upon it, and, suddenly, the joyous silence turned to music and every living thing began again to dance, and the girl joined the dance, for she now had the white stone, upon which was written what she had never had, what she had searched for through her adventures and trials and had never found—upon it was written this: Susanna.