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Arabeth

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ARABETH AWOKE BECAUSE HER FRONT DOOR WAS BEING UNLOCKED. FOR hours, she could do very little and lay still as a plank in the attic while her boarded-up windows were pulled open, and feet slid and scampered up and down her dark, dusty floors, and boxes were heaved and pulled through all her rooms. It was only in the afternoon that she felt movement flow back to her as her gas and water were turned on. It took a long time before she felt she had gathered enough strength to stand up. Creaking and groaning, she raised herself off the attic floor and, submerged in shadows, had a peek downstairs at the newcomers.

There were four of them: a mother, a father, and two children. Arabeth caught glimpses of them as they to-ed and fro-ed beneath her – blonde, balding, trimmed, curly. The mother seemed to be directing the work; the father was doing most of the shifting, along with two large men in

fluorescent orange vests; the children got in the way.

Arabeth decided she liked the curly one best. She was smaller than her brother, and had a cheerful, rosy face. She reminded Arabeth of somebody from a very long time ago.

It took three days before enough furniture had been put inside Arabeth for the family to move in, and then came the heavy rains. Arabeth had been gaining strength as the days passed, and by the fifth night she felt alive enough to venture down from the attic and make her way, shadow-wrapped, through the dreaming rooms. They had not dreamed for twenty years, and now they were dreaming of lives and laughter, and it made her happy.

She was glad that the family had not yet had time to explore the garden. There was something in the garden which did not dream of lives and laughter, Arabeth remembered, though she couldn't for the life of her think of what it was.

On the sixth day, Arabeth felt like sun was pouring in through her skin, because the rain had gone away, leaving a hard blue gorgeous sky, and the children were arranging their toys in Arabeth's secret hiding places, and the parents were hanging up pots and pans and wondering about radiators and Internet modems, and because there was real life in Arabeth at last.

On the eighth day, a man came in to install an Internet connection.

'Got some trouble with this place,' he said. 'Very bad services.'

'Old wiring?' asked the father. He worked in a telecommunications office, and knew about wiring.

'Been replaced a dozen times,' said the man. 'It's just... bad. Magnetic fields, they say. Or water underground, messing with the cables.' He had his hand inside one of Arabeth's walls, trying to fish out a cable. It tickled. Arabeth nudged the cable into his grasping fingers.

'Got it!' he grunted, pulling it out. 'It's funny, the phone lines aren't the only thing weird about this house. It doesn't get mail, you know.'

'What do you mean?' asked the mother.

'It just doesn't. I've got a mate at the Post Office, he says they've gotten complaint after complaint about this house 'cos it doesn't get any mail. It's a mystery. Even with registered letters. You know a letter's coming. It gets to the post office, it just vanishes. Or, sometimes, the postman's got a letter for here with him on his rounds. Gets to the house, it's gone.'

'That's impossible,' said the father.

'That's what I said,' said the man. 'It's a mystery. Mind you, this was years ago. Nobody's sent a letter here for twenty years anyway.' He pressed a button on the router, and it lit up with yellow and orange lights. 'Let's see if that works,' he said.

Arabeth sensed something new flowing through her, a buzzy hum in the air, full of thoughts. She trailed a finger through it and licked it. It tasted of electricity and newness. She liked it.

For the first two weeks of winter, as Arabeth's walls began to shift and creak with the growing cold, there was so much to do in the house that the brother and sister almost never left it. At first, there were rooms to fill with life. Every day, Arabeth felt more loved by her family – and every night, too, when the sister dreamt of her fitfully, mapping out her halls and rooms in gold and shadow, wandering her attic and cellar which were suddenly miles long, and filled with sudden

adventure; and when the parents made love, Arabeth also felt it, the hot quiet rolling moan of it spreading through her rooms like syrup. And after the rooms were full, and the kitchen and the toilet and the living room too, there were games to play: hide-and-seek, which tickled Arabeth's dusty little places, and games of tag up and down the stairs and dashing madly through her halls, which made her wish so much to join in, and I Spy, and when the rains came round again, Monopoly and Carcassonne and computer games and curling up in the windowsills, watching her windows cry.

But sooner rather than later, the children had found every nook and played every game, and grown bored, and when winter came properly, it was glintingly cold and clear as glass, and it was decided that it was time to explore the garden.

When Arabeth heard this, she became afraid, but did not know why. She felt creeping shadows in her cellar, where the mice played amongst the wine bottles. She felt damp and draughty, and clapped her doors in a haunted wave across the house, startling her family. Nevertheless, the world was covered in an eggshellworth of ice and full of sunlight, and the children dressed in scarves and coats and ran outside.

Arabeth was beside herself with fear. She tossed from wall to wall. She ran down from the attic, not caring if anybody saw her, and plummeted into windows and cupboards and lintels and ceilings. She cried in creaky hinges and screamed in old pipes. After that, she went to talk to the garden.

The garden was older than Arabeth, and he remembered when there hadn't been an Arabeth, just a wide drowsing field of butterfly-and-bee-heavy wildflowers and trees, which had woken up as men had built fences across it and started digging roads and laying deep foundations in the earth. The garden's name was Imlyn, and he was as old and cunning as the gnarled trees which grew across his back.

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