Please. You make us uncomfortable.
You are always watching us. Like a ghost haunting us . . .

Though her husband had died seven years before, the widow still drove past the house in which they'd lived for more than two decades.
Why?—no reason.
(To lacerate a scar, that it might become a raw-throbbing wound again?
To lacerate her conscience? Why?)
She was in a new life now. She was no longer in the old life.
He could not know. He had died, his ashes were buried in a proper cemetery. All that was gone. In her new, safe life, in which she lived alone.
Yet: Sometimes she drove past the old house deliberately, and sometimes she found herself driving past without (quite) realizing where she was.
Then, it was something of a shock to see—where she was . . .

 Often when she was driving she would instruct herself Maybe no. Not today. And yet when she approached a crucial turn she found herself unable to drive onward as if doing so would be a betrayal of her husband whom she had loved very much.
As he had loved her. Very much.
She felt the same way while driving through the small town in which her husband's ashes were buried—in a cemetery behind an old red-brick
Presbyterian church that dated to the mid-nineteenth century. She could not not stop at the cemetery. Could not.

*Just us two. No one else.*

*Very much.*

Of course, she understood how mistaken this was. No force was compelling her to drive past her former house, or to stop in the little town that was losing population and becoming derelict since an interstate-highway bypass opened close by.

Its sad Main Street, with vacant stores. *For sale* signs. The small cemetery in need of mowing, at this time of year festooned with dandelions gone to seed.

The widow parks at the cemetery, she visits the husband's grave. *It is only my own mind. It is not another's mind that is making me do these things.*

Still, she clears away leaves and other debris from the grave. Sets upright the ceramic pot containing the (artificial) wisteria with its sinewy vines and lavender blossoms she'd brought to the grave, that has been surprisingly durable through winter months. Almost, you would think the blossoms were real . . .

*A small enough gesture from you, my beloved wife. But thank you.*

She did not like it: They were watching her.

She was certain. The new owners of the house. For she so often drove past the house.

At more rational times she thought no, of course not. The new owners—(whom she'd met: They were nice-seeming people)—would have to be standing at the front windows of the house and looking out at just the time she drove past. They would have to recognize her car.

Yet, approaching the house she begins to feel her heartbeat quickening. A visceral alertness of the kind you might feel approaching the edge of a great height. Vertigo, it is called. A sensation of dread, and yet yearning. You dare not approach—yet, you are drawn to approach. Almost, you feel an opened hand on the small of your back, gently pushing.

*Come here! Come forward.*

*Yes! You know exactly what to do.*

The new owners had assured her, out of sympathy for her widowhood (she'd supposed), that, any time she wished, she could come back to visit the house. They'd been very friendly, very kind-seeming, but she'd never wanted to return to the house in any way that involved them. Though she knew better she could not help but think of them as intruders whom she resented, and whom she knew her husband, who could be unreasonable, would most bitterly resent.
So many years she'd driven this route: returning to the house on Linden Road which was five miles from the small suburban college at which she taught English; turning her car into the asphalt driveway; feeling anticipation as she approached the house, unless it was apprehension—for she never (quite) knew what her husband's mood would be.

Nearly always, the husband was home. For the husband did consulting work in applied mathematics, working from an office at home.

Not wanting to think Like clockwork for, living our lives, as our bodies live for us, we are not at all clockwork; we do not feel ourselves to be clockwork; each second is new to us, quicksilver and unexpected, undefined.

Unexpected: that day she'd returned home, not from the college but from the medical clinic. With the news that had shaken them both.

_Him_ more than her. For he'd been the one who'd most adamantly not wanted a child.

In his family, mental derangement. (As he called it.) Not mental illness, insanity, or psychosis—nothing that could be clinically diagnosed, or treated. Just—derangement.

She, the wife, a young wife at the time, had not wanted to inquire too closely. She saw the pain in her husband's handsome thin-cheeked face. She saw that he was distressed, and anxious.

He'd carried himself with a sort of sinewy muscularity, a physical obstinacy that didn't express his scrupulousness, his fastidiousness. He'd been a perfectionist, and had driven himself very hard in graduate school; from rueful remarks he'd made, she understood that he had come close to a nervous breakdown, or perhaps had actually had a nervous breakdown before he'd met her, and he did not want to risk anything like this again.

What is manliness, masculinity?—she felt sympathy for her husband, for whom imperfection was a kind of shame. She did not like to pry into his personal life, which he called “private.”

Still, she'd thought that, possibly, _mental derangement_ might not be such a risk . . .

He'd reacted almost violently: No.

No pregnancy. Must terminate. We can't. Can’t take the chance. What if. No.

But—

No. I've told you.

Can't risk.

Even if the child is—is not—abnormal. Even then—

Our own lives. Must come first.

What we mean to each other.

She'd done as he had instructed. Or rather, as he'd demanded.

Thinking—_It is what I want too. Of course._

Emotionally, the husband was the center of her life. Her professional career was not very challenging to her; She had no wish to compete strenuously, and to excel; she was highly competent, reliable and well liked. At her small suburban college it was not difficult to be promoted to the highest professorial rank and to decline (when, more than once, it was offered to her) advancement into administration. Her salary was not high but it supplemented her husband's salary to a degree that made them financially secure.
We can afford a child. Children.
She did not say. Did not risk.
(Perhaps) (she was thinking) it was a mistake to have moved into a place not far from the old house when her husband died. She'd had to sell the house—of course. Soon after his death which had been an unexpected death after a brief, virulent illness. In a state of grief and exhaustion she'd looked at a number of possible places in which to live nearer the college yet somehow she'd found nothing quite right, and decided to rent a condominium hardly a mile from the old house on Linden Road.

And so, approaching her former house as she'd approached it for so many years, sometimes alone in her car, sometimes beside her husband in the driver's seat—(for always Jed drove when she was with him in the car; He would never have allowed anyone else to drive), she could not overcome a sense of apprehension though she knew, of course she knew, that the house belonged to strangers, and that (probably!) these strangers were not standing vigilant at their front windows waiting for the widow to pass by. Yet still, her heartbeat quickened as she approached: In her mind's eye she parked her car as usual in front of the garage, and made her way from the car into the small flagstone courtyard, and opened the front door which was painted a deep ruby-red, and stepped inside—Hello? I'm home . . .

The husband had not liked it if, as she'd done sometimes, she entered the house without announcing her arrival. Hoping for a few minutes to herself, private time, to catch her breath (she might've said), put a few groceries away in the kitchen which she'd picked up on the way home, before calling to her husband—Hello, Jed. It's me.

Sometimes, if Jed was home, and he'd heard her, he would come to greet her; more often, she would seek him out in his office, which was a large, comfortable room at the rear of the house on the second floor.

Once, when a late-afternoon meeting was canceled and she'd returned to the house earlier than Jed expected her, the door had been locked against her. The doors.

She'd tried the front door—locked. Thinking it was just an accident, she tried another. Locked.

And another—also locked.

Of course, she should have had a house key. What was the reason she hadn't had a house key?

He was nearly always home. His car was in the driveway now. She'd lost the habit of taking a house key with her and so, after a moment's hesitation, she knocked on the door, not loudly, not rudely, for she did not want to disturb the husband if he was in deep concentration at his work, but still there was no answer and (so far as she could see) no movement inside the house.

She walked around the house, peering in windows. “Jed? Jed?”

Had to be upstairs. Maybe playing music, wearing earphones.

(Why was she so agitated? Her underarms stung with perspiration, a rivulet of sweat ran down the side of her face like an errant tear.)

(But he was alone, she was sure. He had never brought anyone to the house in her absence. She was sure.)

“Jed? It's me . . .”

Each of the doors was locked. Pride prevented her from checking the windows.
The solution came to her—*I will go away as if this has not happened. No one will know.*

It was an era before cell phones. But if she’d called, she had the idea that her husband would not have answered the phone.

She went away. She returned hours later, at the expected time. All the doors were unlocked. Interior lamps had been lit. When she entered the house he was awaiting her with a little bouquet of Shasta daisies, carnations, and red rosebuds.

“For you, dear. Missed you.”

She was touched. She was relieved. She smiled happily, as a young bride might smile, sweetly naive, trusting. She kissed his cheek and asked, as it would have been natural for a young bride to ask, “But why? Today is not a special day, is it?”

“No day with you is not a special day, darling.”

He had shaved, his lean jaws were smooth and smelled of lotion. His white cotton shirt was fresh. The sleeves were rolled to the elbows as he rarely, perhaps never wore them.

Later, when the husband was elsewhere and would not discover her, she’d examined his office. His closet in their bedroom. Their bed.

Cautiously lifted the bedclothes to stare at the lower sheet that (so far as she could judge) was smoothed flat as it had been when, that morning, she’d briskly made up the bed.

*What on earth am I looking for?*—she was ashamed, she had no idea.

*What has he made me into, how has this happened? How is this person—me?*

In marriage, one plus one is more than the sum of two. But sometimes in a marriage, one plus one is less than the sum of two.

He was correct: It would not have been worth the risk.

She’d come to agree. Their very special feeling for each other, their unique love, would have been irrevocably altered by the intrusion of another.

Seven years! The time has passed quickly; or, the time has passed very slowly.

There have been few changes to the house, that she can see from the road. But there had been changes.

When she drives past the house she finds herself slowing the car, to stare. Her heart quickens in anticipation of seeing something that will upset her.

She hates it, seeing changes in her former house that upset her!—thinking how these changes would upset her husband too.

For some reason the new owners removed the redwood fence which the husband had had erected at the front of the property, for privacy. (Why on earth? Had the fence become rotted? She didn’t think so.)

Then, they’d had the house repainted: a dull beige with brown shutters so much less striking than the original cream with dark red shutters.

Once, seeing that the new owners had had a large oak tree removed from the front lawn, she’d felt weak with indignation. She’d happened to drive past at the time of the tree’s demise, chainsaw rending the air into unbearably shards of sound. Screaming.

*He* had not screamed at his fate. Rather, he’d been medicated, unable to protest. He had not even known (she’d wanted to think) what was happening
in his body. That sequence of small, inexorable surrenders.

In fact, yes: He had screamed at his fate. He’d screamed at her.
Not that he’d known who she was, then. Not that he’d hated her.
Slowly she drove in the tense delirium of approach. For it seemed to her—
Of course, I am going home. It’s an ordinary evening.
(But why then was she so frightened? The ordinary does not provoke fear.)
He hadn’t been comfortable with the ordinary, in fact. His work had been a
highly refined mathematics applied to the manufacture of digital equipment
which she hadn’t understood even when he’d tried to explain to her in the
plainest speech.
He hadn’t been comfortable with resting. He hadn’t taken a vacation in the
more than twenty years she’d known him. At one time he’d worked as many
as one hundred hours a week as a consultant for (rival) companies. She felt a
thrill of horror that, now that he’d died, he could not ever do anything mean-
ingful again. That would have hurt him, stung his pride.

How surprised he’d have been to see a stranger so comfortable in his house.
At his worktable, a long white table, wonderfully practical, useful. What is
this? What has happened? In his bed.
How like science fiction our lives are, she thinks. The alternate universe in
which, innocently, ignorantly, we continue to exist as we’d been, unaware that,
in another universe, we have ceased to be.

Without knowing what she has done, the widow has parked the car on Linden
Road. In front of the house.
Oh but why! She’d meant to drive past.

She thinks—But I am safe now. I can’t be hurt now. I am alive now. I am not
sick now.

After her husband died she’d been sick for some time. An actual sickness,
shingles. A sickness of the heart, heartsickness, that had almost killed her.
Where are you, I am waiting for you. God damn you—have you betrayed me?
She had not! She had not betrayed him.
Dreams of wading into a river. Swimming a river, her arms and legs like
lead. Dreaminess of surrender to the leaden river that drew her down, to
dreamless sleep.
It’s about time. Seven years! Rats are more faithful than you.

“Hello—?”
She hears a voice, unfamiliar, yet friendly seeming, as she stands in the road-
way, uncertainly. It is strange—she doesn’t remember having left her car. . .

In the asphalt driveway of the former house a woman is standing, waving to
her. This must be Mrs. Edrick, whom she’d met seven years before when she’d
sold the house through a broker.
How embarrassing! And there is another person, a man, the husband proba-
bly, in the background.

They have sighted her. She must acknowledge them now. The friendly-seeming
woman is coming to speak to her.

Please. You make us uneasy.
You are always driving past our house. You are always watching us. We hate
it, you are a ghost haunting our lives.
How stricken she would be, if the Edricks spoke to her in this way! She is feeling breathless as if under attack.

But Mrs. Edrick does not utter these hostile words. Mrs. Edrick is smiling pleasantly at her. The woman is just slightly younger than she, and stands with her arms folded across her chest as if cold. At a little distance, Mr. Edrick is standing hesitantly as if uncertain whether to come forward, or retreat back into the house as husbands sometimes do in such circumstances.

“Hello! Is it—Brenda?”

“Brianna.”

“Bri-anna.’ Yes. It’s been awhile since we’ve spoken. How are you?”

The question seems bold, even aggressive. How is she?—She is a widow.

“I—I’m well. I’m sorry if I...”

“Oh no, not at all! We would have called but we’d misplaced your number. We see you sometimes driving past our house—that is, your former house—and thought we’d have an opportunity to tell you: There seem to be things of yours still in the house, of which you’re probably not aware.”

Of which you’re probably not aware. The formality of the woman’s speech suggests that it has been planned, rehearsed. The widow sees now that there is something steely and resolute in the woman’s smiling face.

Things of yours still in the house. This is the crucial statement. She feels a jolt of apprehension, and yet hope.

“At least we think it must belong to you, Brianna, or to your late husband. Several boxes...”

Mrs. Edrick explains that a furnace repairman had recently come to the house and discovered, in the crawl space, several boxes taped shut with black duct tape that seemed to have been there for some time.

Crawl space. A sinister term, she’d thought it. Her husband had stored things in the basement, in the “crawl space,” which he hadn’t wanted to discard but didn’t think he needed to access any longer: boxes of old receipts, checks, IRS records, expired warranties, and miscellaneous documents. All she’d ever seen of the “crawl space” was its opening, at a height of about four feet, in one of the dank basement walls; her husband had managed to crawl inside, to leave boxes there, but she’d never felt any curiosity about exploring it.

What was the purpose of a crawl space in a house, she’d asked her husband, and he’d said he supposed it was for extra storage, and for the use of workmen who needed to access parts of the basement otherwise out of reach; electricians, for instance.

Pleasantly smiling, Mrs. Edrick leads Brianna into the kitchen. (Quickly Brianna sees that the kitchen, her former kitchen, is both familiar and utterly strange: Have the new owners repainted the walls? Is the ceiling no longer white, but an oppressive beige? The tile floor, richly dark-russet red when she’d lived here, is now a busy and unattractive swirl of pinpoint colors. A wall of cupboards seems to have disappeared.) “Here you are!”—Mrs. Edrick is handing her a soiled-looking shoebox taped shut with black duct tape. “The repairman brought this box upstairs, it’s the smallest. He says there are two or three larger boxes still there. We’d been meaning to contact you—we hope the boxes don’t contain anything too important.”

Was this rude? Brianna wonders.

But no, obviously not. Not intentionally rude.

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Quickly she says, “Yes—I mean no, I’m sure the boxes don’t contain anything—important.” She is speaking hesitantly, staring at the box that exudes an air of subtle, indefinable menace.

(What could Jed have stored in a box this size? Nothing out of the ordinary, surely. Financial records, check stubs? Letters?)

(But what sort of letters, hidden away in a crawl space in a taped-over shoebox?)

How excessively intricate, the taping! Brianna recalls how carefully, over-carefully, her husband had taped packages for the mail. Taking his time, as if he’d enjoyed the simple methodical process, taping shut.

Her eyelids flutter. A sudden vision, as in a surreal film, of a human face, small, possibly a child’s face, black tape covering mouth, eyes.

*What is best. Don’t question.*

On the box is a badly faded label, hand-printed in the husband’s distinctive hand: 12 Feb. 2009. No other identification. She recalls the stately old Parker fountain pen he’d had. An artifact from another era, a father’s or a grandfather’s pen that required liquid ink.

After the husband’s death, the pen had disappeared.

“Oh, dear!—I hope the box wasn’t waterlogged. We had a little flood in our basement from all the rain, last spring . . .”

“Oh yes. We did too.”

(But why does the widow say *we*? She lives alone in the rental property a mile away, there is no longer any *we.*)

In a confiding-neighbor voice Mrs. Edrick says: “We keep all sorts of things too. In the garage mostly. It’s terrible, how things accumulate in our lives as if they had a life of their own. . . .”

The widow murmurs agreement. She has no idea what Mrs. Edrick is chattering about. Her eyes well with tears Mrs. Edrick is politely not acknowledging.

Weighing the soiled shoebox in her hand. Yes, probably papers. Letters. (Love letters?)

(But there were no love letters exchanged between the widow and her husband who’d never spent any time apart after they’d met.)

Her breath is coming short. Every particle of her being is crying out in astonishment—*How is this possible, is this something my husband has left for me? Or is it something my husband did not ever intend for me?*

She feels a moment’s vertigo. Paralysis. She has taken the shoebox from Mrs. Edrick but it is very heavy—she has had to set it down on a table.

Feeling the other woman’s eyes on her. The husband has approached silently, behind her; the Edricks have exchanged an indecipherable look.

Almost palpable, their pleas tinged with impatience, anger.

*Please go away. Leave this house. Do not haunt us—no more!*

But again Mrs. Edrick appears to be very friendly. Seeing the expression in the widow’s face of something like pain, and yet yearning, she says, “Brenda—I mean Brianna—if you’d like, you can examine the crawl space yourself. You have our permission! The furnace repairman said there were at least two more boxes. He might have dragged them out if I’d asked him, but I didn’t think to ask, at the time. And neither of us”—(Mrs. Edrick is referring now to her husband, whose face Brianna has not seen)—“is especially eager to crawl into such a space.”

The widow is feeling disoriented. She recognizes the sensation—heightened excitement, apprehension—a curious mixture of fear and hope—an intensifi-
cation of the way she invariably feels when she drives by the former house. And now, so suddenly, with no preparation she is standing in the former house.

What has brought her here? Has it been—him?

Certainly, she does not want to descend into the basement! Not into the crawl space!—which she remembers as grungy, filthy with cobwebs, a strong rank smell of damp earth.

Yet she hears herself say in an earnest voice: “I—I think I will, thank you. Yes. I’d like to see what’s in the boxes that my husband left for me.”

The Edricks have led her downstairs into the basement—as if she’d lived in this house for twenty years needs anyone to show her the way. Here too, the widow feels both disoriented and comforted, for there are mismatched chairs and a plush dark-orange sofa facing an ugly TV screen that she has never seen before, yet the ceiling of loosely-fitted squares is exactly as she remembers, and the olive-green floor tile is only slightly more worn.

Jed had detested TV. Their screen had been much smaller than this screen. She’d watched TV infrequently, always with a sense of guilt.

*Your mind. Your brain. Beware of rot.*

Mr. Edrick has dragged over a chair, that the widow might step on it to crawl through the waist-high opening in the cement wall.

“Don’t forget these! You will need both.”

Almost gaily Mrs. Edrick presses a flashlight and a pair of shears into the widow’s hand.

The widow steps onto the chair. The Edricks steady her, as she positions a knee so that she can crawl forward into a kind of tunnel like an animal’s burrow, no more than three feet in height. A repairman might make his way into such a space on his haunches but the widow finds it easier to crawl—like an animal, or a child.

Her heart is pounding rapidly. Her nostrils pinch against the damp rank earthen odor.

The cramped tunnel is less than a few yards long. Yet, by the time she reaches the space itself, she is feeling lightheaded from having held her breath for so long.

*Why are you here? You are not wanted here.*

*Rats are more faithful than you have been.*

With difficulty the widow lowers herself into the storage space. It is the size of a small bathroom or a large closet, with a puddled floor of broken cement; the feeble light of the flashlight reveals that there is an unexpected light hanging from the low ceiling, which she turns on—this too is feeble, no more than a forty-watt bulb. There are just two squat, badly water-stained and intricately taped cardboard boxes on the floor. The smell here is very strong, oppressive. Cobwebs stick to the widow’s face, hair. If only she’d known to wear something on her head! And her open-toed summer shoes are not appropriate for this treacherous place. She hears a sound of scuttling—beetles . . .

She is breathing very quickly now, near-panting. It is very difficult to get enough oxygen into her lungs.

The beetles have frightened her. Or, disgusted her. But she will persevere.

Such a low ceiling! This is indeed oppressive. She isn’t able to stand upright but must crouch like a simian.
She tugs at one of the boxes, which is so heavy she can’t budge it. Books inside? Jed had owned so many books, some of them oversized, first editions of mathematical classics . . .

She couldn’t possibly drag either of these boxes with her back along the tunnel. If she wants to bring their contents with her she will have to open the boxes and unpack them in the crawl space.

After much struggle with the shears, which isn’t as sharp as she might have hoped, she manages to open the first box: Indeed it is just books.

Of not much interest, she thinks. Disappointing!

Why had Jed hidden away A History of Mathematics, Discrete Mathematics, A History of Zero, A History of Calculus, Infinity and Beyond . . . She’d hoped there might be something valuable here, and revealing; something Jed had not wanted to share with his wife, perhaps.

You don’t want to know. Why do you want to know?

Suddenly she feels panic. A constriction of the chest, a wave of fear. Must escape!

She stumbles to the tunnel. She forces herself into it, crawling on hands and knees, but what is this?—the way is blocked?

It must be a mistake, of course. She has just crawled along the tunnel and knows that the way is not blocked, though it is disconcertingly narrow at one point.


No answer. She tries to force herself past the blockage, which seems to be solid rock, but she is frightened of getting just her head and shoulders through the opening, and being then trapped in this terrible place.

“Hello? What have you done? Help me. . . .”

No answer. She is trying not to become hysterical.


No answer. No sound except her panicked breathing.

The new owners so resent her haunting the house, their property. They can think of no other way to stop her. Is this possible?

Of course, this is not possible. Ridiculous!

Yet they have gone away, upstairs. They have switched off the basement lights and they have shut the basement door. They will go away and leave their trapped visitor. They have planned this for years and when they return, the widow’s cries will have grown faint.

When they return a second time, and a third time, her plaintive cries will have ceased.

Still, she calls for help. She thinks—They are warning me, maybe. It is punishment for me—a warning.


She is begging. She is desperate. But there is no answer. They have gone away, they have shut the door at the top of the basement stairs.

No one’s fault but your own. What did you think you were doing, joining me in the grave? Seven years too late.

Oxygen is fading. Her brain is fading. To occupy her mind, to occupy her panicked fingers she unpacks the first box fully—yes, these are all mathematical books, badly water-stained.
In some, Jed had made numerous annotations. What had the deluded man thought, such fussy notes, such calculations, would make a difference?

The second box is more promising. Amid crumpled and stained sheets of newspaper used as padding there is something small, desiccated—mummified? A doll?

Not a human infant, the widow is sure. But disconcertingly lifelike.

Or—is it a human infant, so mummified that it has lost its human face?

Her hands are trembling with dread, and with excitement.

Cautiously she lifts the thing from the cardboard box, shaking off the stained newspapers. All about her is a scuttling of glinting beetles of which she is scarcely aware. She stares at the badly water-stained, faded face, a miniature face, with sightless eyes, broken glass, or plastic, or something that has atrophied and is no longer recognizable as even intended to be human.

The miniature pug-nose has been mashed flat, the nostrils are smudged holes.

The mouth, a battered O like the mouth of a small fish.

“Oh! Poor thing . . .”

A wave of sorrow sweeps over her, the futility of all things human and non-human. She holds the doll to her chest, in cradled arms. She rocks it in her arms. Her eyes fill with tears, her pain is more exquisite than she could have guessed. So many years, so many days, yet no time has passed.