

## People Like Them

He landed a good gig. Looking in on people's homes would keep them in Aspen. The hikers were gone; the skiers yet to descend. Those in town now were there for the golden trees, and the occasional red and orange ones the dry summer had miraculously produced.

The management company had turned him down at first, though his record was clear. It had to do with his name, he thought, and that he was darkly complexed. But so were the road crews, the waiters, the bellhops, the maids, even some servers in the Mediterranean restaurant.

He'd grown up outside of Boulder, and saw the town change into a high-tech mecca. His parents had sold their home and fled to Arizona, where another branch of the family was installed south of Phoenix. But Raoul couldn't go; wouldn't go. Those Rockies held him fast, and he held them just as fast in his yearning, hungry heart.

And for what did he hunger and yearn? Everything, starting with those stone mansions, occupied for maybe one or two weeks a year by millionaires who lived in New York, Dallas, Seattle, Denver, and one family from Honolulu who must have thought snow was an exotic delight.

He hungered also for Sally, who'd gotten up her nerve and moved up there with him, though to be fair, all she'd left behind was a job she didn't like processing Social Security applications, a mother she didn't speak to, and an ex-boyfriend who tried, every other month, to get back on her good side.

Raoul was thirty-one; Sally, thirty-five. Her blonde hair and blue eyes enchanted him. Opposites attract, she said, though they weren't opposite really, but very much aligned. Sally hungered, too, not for money, though God knew it helped, than for some spiritual space she could occupy and just be.

His job was to visit seven homes once a week; make sure that all the lights worked, the faucets ran; the grounds were lovingly mown, trimmed, and raked, though if he had to guess, the guys who came out in their tan shirts didn't really give a shit; and the interior dusted and mopped per whatever schedule had been arranged. Then, when an owner was on the way in, make sure the refrigerator and pantry were stocked according to pre-selected specifications, which usually included a lot of high-end champagne, French cheese, and Belgian chocolates, subject to change at the last minute, of course.

The arrangement was particularly convenient because the homes were within walking distance of their apartment, paid for by the management company, in the fancier part of town. High-end location aside, it had six hundred square feet and no mountain view. The windows rattled when the wind blew, and the wind blew all the time.

Sally got a part-time job in the bookstore, because they happened to be hiring the day she wandered in looking for a guide to local hiking trails. She didn't know anything about books. The manager said she'd learn. The off-season was always quiet, and she'd have time to get up to

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speed on new titles, mostly memoirs and mysteries, before December, when the skiers lit up the town. Christmas in Aspen was wild.

The weather went from crisp to freezing overnight. This meant Raoul had to assess the heating system in each home. Since they'd all been built within the last two to three years, the furnaces were in good shape. Still, he got a service guy out and make sure. It was the same one every time, Lloyd from Leadville. Raoul saw nothing funny in that alliteration, but Lloyd sure did. His mother, after being unwilling located to the middle of nowhere so her husband could work at the Climax Mine, underwent a change of heart and assigned each of her five children a name beginning with "L." Lola moved to L.A.; Lester and Larry were still local; and Lisa, also local, was expecting her first. When asked how her angel would be christened, she said Mary, not for religious reasons, but because M came right after L.

The Parson home had two furnaces, and each needed a new filter. Strictly routine. Only Lloyd didn't have any, and would have to order them special. He got in his truck, and waved to Raoul as he backed down the steep, curving driveway. Raoul stood a moment in the garage to watch him go. He pressed the button to lower the door, made his way across four parking bays, three of which contained a late-model Porsche, a BMW sedan, and a Mercedes SUV, to the hallway into the kitchen.

This was his favorite property. It had over eight-thousand square feet; two master suites, both on the main level but on opposite sides of the house; floor to ceiling windows that gave on the slopes and the forests beyond; a jacuzzi surrounded by twining vines in a wrought-iron trellis; and a kitchen with three islands, two dishwashers, a six-burner Viking range; and three wall ovens. The art he didn't really understand. All of it was modern, abstract, emphasizing color over subject. The floors were a rich honey color, decorated with heavy Persian rugs.

Leather furniture was everywhere, and very comfortable to sit on, though he knew he wasn't supposed to.

There was top-notch liquor on a wheeled cart in the den, a spacious room with wood beams in the ceiling and a stone fireplace. He helped himself to a crystal tumbler and a generous pour of Bourbon. There was wood and kindling ready to go, but to light a fire would be insane. If someone came to the door, he could ditch the drink, and say he was just closing up, but smoke from the chimney would tell a very different story.

The surrounding homes were empty. He knew because they were on his list. Their outside lights came on automatically at dusk, which is was just then becoming.

He called Sally, and told her to get over there.

"Where?" she asked. She had just finished her daily yoga routine and was sweaty head to toe.

He gave her the address.

"Why?" she asked.

"Time to party."

"Huh?"

He explained.

"You'll get in trouble," she said, though she liked the idea a lot.

"No one around for miles. Who's to know?"

She showered, and dressed in her usual jeans and pullover sweater. She seldom bought new clothes. She didn't like thinking about appearances, hers, or anyone else's, though of course she noticed what everyone wore, and whether or not he or she (usually he) were attractive. It was part of her inner dilemma, one she'd always had, between desire and acceptance.

Raoul was waiting for her in the driveway, wearing a smart leather jacket she'd never seen. He ushered her into the empty bay. Next to the Mercedes Sally's twenty-year-old Toyota Corolla looked pathetic. She pinched his sleeve.

"Nice," she said.

"Guy's got four more. You should see the closet."

"Are you sure this is okay?"

"Yeah, why not?"

She explained that most home security systems had a feature that let the owner see when doors were opened and closed. If someone really wanted to study the activity, the long time spent in the house would be hard to explain.

Raoul looked down at her skeptically. Her ex-boyfriend had worked for a home security system in Boulder, which is how she no doubt came by this knowledge.

"I'll say the cleaning crew didn't show, and I took care of it myself," Raoul said.

"Well, they don't know you, so they might believe it."

Raoul didn't clean anything, something on which Sally occasionally remarked. He thought she was too fussy about things like that. He said if she didn't do it, he would, eventually. To her this meant when the place became intolerable.

He showed her the house. In one of the master bedrooms there was a vanity table with bottles of perfume. Sally brought a couple of them to her nose, found one she liked, and dabbed some on her wrists and behind each earlobe. Raoul stared. He was surprised. She explained that in high school she'd worked in a department store selling cosmetics. Maybe that's where he disdain of fashion and finery came from, he thought.

The shower stall was enormous, with two shower heads. They stood in it together, fully clothed, and thought about what it would be like to use it every day. Sally said you'd never want to leave. Then there was the soaking tub, big enough for three people. That made her laugh.

What kind of relationship put three people in a bathtub?

He asked if she'd brought the sandwiches he'd told her to pick up at the store.

"Yes."

"What kind?"

"Roast beef for you, like you said."

"What did you get?"

"Ham and cheese."

They were in the kitchen at that point, sitting in a pair of plush upholstered stools, their elbows on the island, a slab of white marble that had gray and blue veins running through it. It made Sally think of a dead body.

Raoul said they couldn't eat food like that in so nice a kitchen. Sally asked what else he had in mind.

The refrigerator was empty. The freezer contained meals one could put in the microwave. Nothing appealed. He told her to go get the sandwiches from her car. She came back to find that he'd opened a bottle of French wine and poured some into two crystal glasses. She didn't know he could move that fast. But then, Raoul was full of surprises. The wine was stored in a climate-controlled room behind the kitchen. He'd scoped it out on an earlier visit.

"They're going to notice," Sally said, and tasted hers. It was smooth and rich. All the wine she'd ever had in her life was nothing compared to this.

"You worry too much."

“Maybe you don’t worry enough.”

They ate quickly and in silence. They realized they’d have to take their trash out with them.

“We should get out of here,” she said.

“Not yet.”

They wandered the house some more. In the room where Raoul had found the Bourbon was a wall of bookshelves and a ladder on wheels that you could slide along and climb. Sally went up it, and chose a book, a history of the Roman Empire. She flipped through the pages. The lettering was small and hard to read. She put it back, and chose another, this time one on the botany of South America. She put that one back, too. The next book she picked was a novel, written in the 1930s about a woman named Harriet Lowe. She pulled a pencil out of her back pocket which she’d taken from the store after filling out the order for the sandwiches, crossed out the name on the page, and wrote in her own. Then she crossed out her last name, so no one would track her down.

The whole time, Raoul had stood below, drinking his wine, gazing out the window into the purple evening. Stars were out. The trees were black. She joined him. Their reflections in the glass made them seem insubstantial, almost ghostly, and when he put his arm around her waist, it was as a phantom had brushed her.

What if this were their house? Would the image before them become more solid? She felt cold, standing there, so she turned away.

Back in the kitchen, she poured herself more wine. Some spilled on the counter. She pressed the sleeve of her sweater onto the droplets, but a pink stain remained. She wet her finger

and pressed hard, rubbing back and forth. It didn't help. Raoul asked what she was doing. She told him. He looked, and said he couldn't see anything.

"It's right there," she said, pointing. He leaned in.

"You must have got it."

"No, it's still there."

"Don't worry about it."

She put her face in her hands for a moment. When she recovered herself she looked around as if she had no idea where she was.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Too much wine."

"Only had a little."

He put his glass down next to hers, took her in his arms, and kissed her sweetly at first, then with more intensity. She'd said before that she liked being kissed that way. She was slow to respond, then did, forcefully.

He led her into the other master bedroom. It had a four-poster bed with a thick, embroidered cover. Against the wall was a charming writing desk that held several beautiful glass paperweights, full of swirling colors. She wanted to touch them, bring one to her cheek and feel its coolness, but he didn't let go of her hand.

They lay on the bed, kissed for a while, stopped, and were still, side by side.

"You know, we've got a perfectly good bed at home," she said.

"Squeaks."

"Yeah."



She laughed. They'd wondered before what the people next to them must think.

She closed her eyes. She could be anywhere, even in her childhood room in the small home shaded by a tall cottonwood tree in Greeley. As an only child, her private fantasy life was rich. She lived in many different houses, all splendid, quiet, gracious, nothing like the one where her parents fought nightly, and her mother shared her bed when she couldn't stand being close to her father.

She opened her eyes, and registered the luxury around her. She didn't want to live where where people had so much more than she did. Better to be where the field was more level. She could tell him she wanted to go back to Boulder, but there was too much money there, too. Other people would always have more, and people like her and Raoul just had to accept that. There was no point thinking anything else. If he didn't see that now, he would have to, before long.

"We should go," she said.

They got up, smoothed the cover and pulled it tight. They removed all traces of themselves carefully. When she looked the countertop, she saw that he was right, the wine had left no stain. He put the leather jacket back in the closet, and put on his denim one he'd dropped on the carpeted floor. He turned out the lights in the rooms they'd been in, and for a moment, they stood in darkness looking out into another darkness. They cast no reflection then, yet she felt firm and steady on her feet.

On the short drive back to their place, they agreed that a house like wasn't all that great, really.

"Didn't feel very cozy, did it?" he asked.

"Not at all. It actually felt sort of lonely."

"Yeah."

“Might sound funny, but I like our place better.”

“Me, too.”

She put her hand gently on his leg while he drove. The winter was going to be all right.  
She could feel it.