

Deep in the Secret Kingdom

My house is a labyrinth. It was built in stages that spanned decades long before I was born. From far down the driveway, in the last light of day, the jumbled rooflines—some copper, some slate—make an enduring puzzle. When he was still a young man, my father purchased the house from a woman who had wanted to be alone and therefore could not tolerate the suburban neighborhoods popping up here and there, ever closer. Reduced to five acres, we now share a cul-de-sac with two more modern homes. My father still lives here, although I rarely see him, as he tends to keep to his wing and I to mine. The roofs above us both have never needed replacing.

In the center of our house, joining the two wings is a smallish room filled by day with light from many windows. The only piece of furniture is an old petite-grand piano. I go there often for peace of mind and think of music. Sometimes I play, but mostly I sit. There is no lamp in the room, so when I go there in the evenings it is dark, unless the moon is especially bright. From the sprawling piano bench, I can see out to gardens or, in the opposite direction, down the

long driveway lined with lampposts that seem to curve their way into the eternal night sky. If I open the windows in summer, I can hear the rhythm of frogs and insects, and this adds greatly to my feeling of peace.

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I am looking for something, but I don't know what it is. Maybe it is a rabbit. I have seen glimpses of a wild cottontail rabbit many times in recent weeks in various rooms of my house. It is always moving lippity-lippity—the way rabbits do—into some sort of darkness: under a bed, into a closet. I used to go investigate, only to find no trace of him. Now when I see him, I simply go to the piano room and think of music or other things ineffable.

It has occurred to me that he might be one of Julian's pets. I have been meaning to ask her but have not yet done so. Julian, my 9-year-old daughter, loves animals deeply and is always asking me for more. I believe she already has a pair of tame rabbits, though, so it seems unlikely to me that she would also have introduced a wild rabbit into our home. Maybe I won't ask her after all. Come to think of it, I seem to remember having reasoned through this before and reaching the same conclusion. What's more, it isn't just the rabbit: I have seen other animals in the house as well. I cannot recall which ones just now, but surely they cannot all be Julian's pets. They are too secretive, and I feel the glimpses I get might be meant only for me.

It is this ambiguous sense of being singled out that keeps me lonely in my knowledge. When I think of telling someone, it is my wife and my father who come to mind, as diverse representations of response: my father suspicious, rational, impatient with such nonsense; my wife indifferent, unblinking in her Catholic ordering of reality. Although he is not religious, my father likes my wife. In fact, he insisted we raise our family in this house, though as I said, we rarely see him. My mother we see more frequently, as she ventures to our wing in quest of Julian

or the younger children. She is the only adult I know who likes to play pretend games with children. Sometimes when I am just wandering around the house, I bump into her, all dressed in queen's clothing. She smiles at me, and I can almost remember something.

By the time I reach the piano room, however, it has receded, and I am left only to sit and gaze, to feel a sense of peace which passes understanding. My fingers touch the keys, trace them up the scales sometimes. My brother used to play when we were young. I don't know where he is now.

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It is morning in the piano room. I notice that the black keys have been turned sideways, are in fact perpendicular to the white keys. I do not feel fear as much as disappointment. Where will I find refuge now?

I puzzle motionless over the strange keys for a long while. Then slowly I tip my head to one side until I can see the foot pedals. They too are askew, jutting out at odd angles. Both my hands and feet are tingling. I am aware of a white ceiling fan rotating noiselessly above me. Although the piano is not a player model, it begins to play itself anyway, then stops mid-song. In a rush of compassion, I try to complete the piece with my own fingers, but the keys will not move for me at all.

With heavy heart, I realize that I must speak to the rest of the household regarding my observations: the animals, the piano, and perhaps some other things. There is in me a feeling of dizziness and faint nausea. My father will be irritated. My mother will get a troubled look in her eyes and be unable to smile.

I fear sometimes that I am somehow responsible for the things I have seen, that it is my ability to see them which has brought them here, that secretly, perhaps, I have sought what is best kept hidden, and that now my house must bear this restlessness I bring.

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I have Julian with me to talk to my father. I found her in her room drawing pictures of wolves. She was not getting the proportions right and quickly accepted my invitation to have a break. I feel Julian is the right choice to accompany me.

She takes my hand as we pass through the piano room on our way to Father's wing, and I notice that the piano has returned to normal. For a brief moment, I reconsider my decision to confess, but I know it is far too late for such ambivalence, and we move on.

Julian stops to look at the art on my parents' walls. "I love these paintings," she says.

"That's only because you don't see them very often," I say.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it's more impressive when you see unfamiliar things."

"Mmm," she says, staring at a painting of a very dark woods with tall straight tree trunks.

I whisper, "Don't be alarmed by what I have to tell Grandfather."

"Of course not," she says, still distracted by the painting.

We find him in the master bedroom, or more precisely, the master bath. We hear the shower running, see the yellow bathroom light throwing itself out into the dark bedroom, where the curtains are all drawn. We turn to go, but just then I catch a glimpse of him, fully clothed, as he steps back from the shower. I move closer, and it appears he is using the shower stall to try to clean something, some large object, a statue, perhaps. Or maybe he shot a deer.

I watch him for a while with something like regret. He notices my presence, is not surprised, almost smiles, then continues with his work. I still cannot see clearly because the shower curtain obscures most of my view. Whatever he is about makes me sad. I feel Julian slip her hand into mine.

“What are you doing, Grandpa?” she asks, over the noise of the shower.

He answers her, but the words are lost.

I half shout, “I’ve been seeing things in the house lately. Rabbits, and a few other animals.”

He glances at me but keeps on scrubbing. He is strong and agile for a man of 70.

“Also the piano,” I try again. “The keys aren’t right.”

He turns the shower off, pulls shut the shower curtain, squares his body to mine.

“What’s wrong with the keys,” he asks.

“They weren’t right earlier,” I say. “And also the piano has played itself.”

He looks at Julian and smiles. “Do you want to go find your Grandma?” he asks, but Julian just holds my hand more tightly.

He returns his attention to me. “You can’t bring him back this way,” he says, finally.

And all at once I comprehend the difference between us: my father cannot bring him back in any way, under any circumstance. And that was the feeling I felt moments ago: it was his loneliness. And as for me, I am torn between bringing him back and going out to find him. Whereas my wife says there is really nowhere to go since we already have the communion of saints.

As Julian and I make our way back to our wing, we pass by my brother’s old room, and Julian cannot resist visiting the pile of stuffed animals still in the corner. Immediately she is

pretending, giving them names and tendencies, mixing storybooks with the world she knows.

After a few minutes, I tell her we have to go. She warns Peter Rabbit, as we are leaving, to stay out of the gentleman's house.

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I wake up curled on the piano bench. All my life I have had the gift of deep sleep. Any time of day and in nearly any position. This is the first time, though, that I have slept the night through in this room. Usually my wife finds me somewhere in the house and guides me to our bed long before sunrise. Today, however, the sun is only minutes from edging over the horizon as I uncoil myself and stretch with vigor.

It hits me, like a shaft of light, that I have no brother.

I study the piano in front of me. It is too early to play, and the songs of many birds are reaching in. The window edges are lined with moisture, framing the world beyond like a retouched photograph, something meant for memory and not to be disturbed. I try not to notice, as I get up to go outside, that some of the black keys do appear again to be perpendicular to the white.

In the front yard, the grass glitters with the new sun, and dew seeps through the leather of my black wingtips. I am grateful to be the only one awake and walking. I work my way to the west side of the house, all in shadow now. It is here the gardens begin. First, a stand of towering pines, among which are multiple bird and wild game feeders, ringlets of flowers, rocks, a lamppost in the center. This is where Julian spends much of her time. In spring, sometimes, there is what she likes to call a brook, separating this garden from the next, which is around the northwest perimeter of the house.

Here begin the serious flowers and shrubs. I do not know their names, but enough of them seem always in bloom, during these summer months, to bring perpetual color and texture to the eye. There are groupings all throughout the backyard between the house and the thicker stand of deciduous trees, the trunks of which stand rich and vibrant now in the early-morning horizontal rays. My parents used to have a full-time gardener until my wife took over all those tasks. The younger children play nearby while she labors, day after day, in the heat and sun. She could not be happier.

In the far back of the yard, almost to the woods, is a religious garden, a place within a place. A ring of shrubbery surrounds a grotto of the Virgin. To her left is a statue of St. Francis, and behind her, overgrown and mostly obscured now, is an old sculpture I did shortly after college. It too is religious, a kind of lattice-work of empty crosses made from scrap iron. My wife, I think, cares little for it.

Just beyond this garden, at the base of a large green ash, at the edge of the woods, is an earthen figure in a crouch, a wood nymph. It is in shadow, but still its whiteness catches the eye. And when I glance—as I feel compelled to do—just as the dart of my iris reaches it, the statue seems to blink.

This is how you know you are awake. When you are awake, you can remember the dream state and compare it to your current awareness, whereas when you are dreaming, all is one. When you are asleep and a statue blinks at you, it is not so strange; but when you are awake and this happens, it is like the sound of a far-off trumpet, the pulse-quickening call for which you have always been waiting.

My vision lately has been failing, so I am grateful when, with perfect clarity, I am able to behold the earthen figure. I watch the face intently, and only my own heartbeat causes faint

rhythmic disturbance in my visual field. It is by these beats that I know I am alive, never in fact so much so. A sheet of morning mist rises slowly between us, and when it has passed, I see that the expression of the face has changed. It is a subtle shift, but in my heart, I know it to be true. And the instant I know this, as if he were merely waiting for my acceptance, the statue nods invitingly, unfolds himself into a standing position. Before I can assimilate this, he is off, running at first, then apparently gliding around the other side of the house, toward the front. I follow. I cannot help it.

In front there is the long driveway. The lights have all flickered out in the daybreak sun. The southern sky turns other-worldly pink and blue and deep purple. It is against this backdrop that I see, or think I see, hovering over the center of the cul-de-sac, a shimmering figure, whom I fancy to be beckoning me. I begin to go, as I feel I must, when there intercedes a wolf, a creature of great size and beauty, the light glinting everywhere off his coat. He is trotting with easy gait, west to east, halfway between me and the other. He is a vibrant living line, and when I take a tentative step closer, he murmurs a low growl, of which the meaning is perfectly clear: I am to go no further. I am in no present danger, either from him or the other, but the line he has conjured before my eyes is utterly unalterable. It is a pleasure beyond reckoning to understand this. There is great peace, after all, in the utterly unalterable.

I watch as the two of them wheel away into the southern sky, growing smaller as they pass through distant ribs of cirrus clouds.

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All day I've been in the piano room. Everything has returned to normal now: the piano keys, the birds in their impossible lilting flight, the rise of the cicadas, the shimmering of leaves in the intermittent breeze. The late afternoon sun lights up my wife in the garden. My youngest

children are playing hide-and-seek just beyond her. Out the opposite way, far down the driveway, my father is chopping wood. I see the powerful swing of the axe, three quarters of a circle in the air bearing down on a chunk of ash. The sharp sound reaches me just after my eyes have taken it in and just as the split pieces are falling to the ground. Over and over there is the sight, and then the sound. The two will not sync up.

My mother enters the room from her wing. She wants to know whether I am all right. I tell her about the time my brother and I got lost for most of a day in the woods beyond our house. It was the crows, moving from tree to tree and speaking in their strange tongue, who brought us back at dusk to the edge of our gardens. I glance out the window as if to see the two of us emerging there from the woods.

She says, "I find your brother in your daughter. And in you."

Suddenly I feel ragged and ashamed. There is nothing of my brother in me. He was like my father: alert, active, decisive, invincible. The one thing we shared was piano, although I play only by ear, whereas he could read the most beautiful notes and make his fingers follow them.

Julian comes in and finds my mother leaning close to me, her eyes calmly searching my face, her hands holding my forearm still. We both turn to look at Julian. She smiles for us. Moments later I am watching the two of them strolling arm in arm through the garden. They reach my wife, who gets up smiling, brushing the dirt from her pant legs. They are gesturing here and there about the garden, talking. My mother and my daughter are holding hands now. My wife, hands on hips, has spotted me in the distant piano room. She gives me a look that teases, one that says I should have known the world is held together by mysterious strings.

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By dusk I have wandered a mile and a half across the countryside to the Church of St. Francis. Along the sanctuary there is a bright yellow hall lined on its outside wall with windows. The fact that there is a broken piano here is only part of the attraction. It is a place between two worlds, neither of which I understand.

My elbows on the dead keys, I hold my head in my hands. Out of the corner of my eye, through a door further in, I can see the steady flickering of a lone prayer candle. Although I am the one who lit it, the flame persists now with its own meaning. The distance between us is great, but it feels like nothing, and there is a burning in my heart. And in my ears there is the echo still of the quarter I dropped in the donation box.

I should have known. I should have recognized by now the shapes love always takes: the small humble hands, the shyness in the eyes, the persistent stirring underneath the sweetly falling dark. I look out the window nearest me and watch the evening trees lose their detail as they recede imperceptibly into the memory of their form. The earth's longing has become palpable. And here among these particles of dusk, deep in the secret kingdom, a blanket made of peace settles over me.