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1

Shortly after five in the morning Helen Budd-Doyle chopped her bed to smithereens, manufacturing a million toothpicks, sufficient kindling for a week, pulp enough to make sixty rolls of toilet paper, and a thick layer of mulch for a garden bed—how ironic was that, she thought. Her bed could be all these things, yet could not provide her with one decent night of sleep.

She knew the time because the alarm clock had just sounded. It was set for five a.m. It had been set that way for the last twenty years of her twenty-eight-year marriage.

‘What do you want an alarm clock for?’ Arnold argued. ‘Get up with the sun.’ But as Helen had barely spoken to her husband for five years, the call to argue back was firmly in control, lashed up and bound for all eternity.

Helen’s attempt to sleep had been futile. It always was. She tossed, turned and thrashed about like a whale harpooned until, exhausted and furious, she would relent and get up out of her single bed to roam around the darkened house by torchlight, make a cup of tea, sit at the kitchen table and ruminate over the nightmares obstructing safe passage through the hours of sleep. But on this particularly bitterly cold morning she’d had enough.



Helen Budd-Doyle took her industrial strength torch—one of the few of Arnold’s collection of torches that worked—and marched out of the house. She assumed that her husband, in the master bedroom on the other side of the house, was sleeping like a newborn. That he could sleep made her even angrier, and her legs moved like pistons at full speed. She stormed down to the garden shed, skirting around the piles of junk, muttering wild obscenities at each useless item that had occupied their yard and life for as long as she could remember.

She fixed her torchlight on a vast array of axes before putting a firm grip on one particular handle. Weapon in hand she marched back to her bedroom and lifting the axe above her head with both hands began chopping. The cheap pine gave way easily.

Sweating after the initial flurry of blows, Helen paused briefly. Calmly taking off her dressing gown, she rolled up the sleeves of her winter flannelette pyjamas and resumed the attack until her bed was no more than a mess of splintered wood. In four trips, she carried the wood down the stairs and outside, dumping it all onto the brick paving. Then she hauled out the bed linen, blankets, and pillow and chucked them on top of the wood.

She hunted for matches, finding a slim box amongst Arnold’s collection from ‘Pubs ’n’ Bars’ around the world. Arnold had never travelled beyond the outer city limits, yet had junk from all around the globe. Helen raged. Why did it all trickle down to him? Why?

Hugging a pile of newspapers to her chest with one hand, the knuckles of the other white from gripping the handle of a full five-litre container of kerosene, she set out with enough fuel to launch her bed into space. Frantically she built up the wood, blankets and newspaper into a cockeyed creation, then drenched the bedraggled sculpture with the entire contents of the kerosene tin. A single match courtesy of the JOY JOY CLUB Laos set it roaring, an angry

beast whose mighty red flame leaped high, the heat smacking the cold air of dawn fair in the face. Helen was sent reeling.

It warmed her immensely to see the fire. She was not so naive as to think she could burn away all the sadness, anger, disappointment and everything else that nagged a person into grey hair and madness, but the bonfire was a good start. Incinerate her nightmares of the past twenty years. Scorched Earth Policy.

As the first leap of flames was starting to settle, her neighbour Astrid appeared in her nightie and dressing gown, her face filled with concern and inquisitiveness. 'What's happening now? It's a terrible stink. And what a fire! I saw it from my kitchen window,' Astrid cried out in her German accent.

'I couldn't sleep,' Helen replied, gazing at the fire, its red-hot flames leaping and dancing. She was mesmerised by how swiftly her rubber pillow had melted into a black pancake. 'That's my bed,' she stated proudly. 'And it's the rubber pillow ponging the place up.'

'You burn your bed when you can't sleep? I cannot drive, but I don't burn Hendel's car!'

'Sleep's different,' Helen answered wearily, staring at the flames.

The flames began to die, the first embers were forming, and soon ashes were all that remained of Helen's bed. Astrid suggested they go to her house for some cocoa. Helen followed her along the track that wound through the busted up, rusted up fridges, stoves, washing machines and general white goods that Arnold had amassed over the years.

White goods? Pha! More like ghost goods, thought Helen. She shivered as puffs of frosty breath lingered around her, hesitated for a moment. No, she decided. Go forward.

She surveyed the street. It was quiet, the streetlights still glowing in the break of day. The neighbourhood had developed over the years from a blue-collar suburb into a not-unpleasant mix of styles. Modern edifices sat amongst the old renovated weatherboard and asbestos

homes, and the gardens mirrored the various dwellings: native trees and bushes were neighbours to roll-on lawn and concrete. The place had been gentrified and her home had been left behind.

Apart from a select few, most of her neighbours kept their distance from the House of Junk. And who could blame them? They'd paid good money to live in a decent house in a decent area. They didn't deserve Arnold's mess.

The beat-up ute that he used for gardening jobs straddled the curb, spilling with mowers, whipper-snippers, rakes and other equipment. The verge itself was taken up with garden pots, mounds of mulch, old watering hoses and broken reticulation piping, and then there was the fence made of telephone directories.

Helen looked up. The sky was a vast fading darkness dotted with stars that blinked at her. Thank God for the sky. It always invigorated and comforted her, maybe because it was one place she could look and not see rubbish.

They passed from the junkyard that was her yard into what Helen considered to be pristine bliss. Astrid's disciplined stretch of well-groomed lawn was devoid of any object except flowers placed in neat rows and separated by precise borders. This was Hendel's work. Helen's chilled feet sank into the spongy, damp grass. Never had neatness felt so good, so seductive.



Arnold was wrestling with his bedsheets as he wavered on the edge of sleep. Lying in the sag of the old mattress, he curled his rotund body up as tightly as he could. And even though he felt armour-plated, the domestic woes shot right through.

He pulled at the quilt that topped the layers of bedclothes and was caught for a moment. Helen had made this quilt and once they had slept together beneath it.

There was a sound outside. It was Helen. She seemed upset. But she was always upset.

Arnold stayed as still as he could. High above him, a moth fluttered against the ceiling. He made his mind blank, as blank as he could. There was a burning smell, but he ignored it.

Helen, Helen, if he could just touch her, softly, behind her ear the way he had done in the beginning. But that was gone. The moth was gone, had disappeared in its flight through the airless bedroom. Arnold wanted it to come back. He wanted to think about the moth. Instead, thoughts of his most recent scrap with Helen came rushing back.

Damn the woman, there was money in what he brought home. They were investments, no less than shares. Were there any thanks? Nope. She acted like he was just some halfwit. Did she think he was going to push a mower around in circles until he dropped dead?

'Environmental vandalism,' he often muttered under his breath as he laboured on lawns used for nothing except for dogs to shit on and cars to loll on while their owners drank gin and tonic inside their supermarket-sized houses.

In better moods, Arnold thought of himself as a barber. A grass barber. Short back and sides, perhaps a buff, a shine, or, for the more uptight individual, a close shave, shearing the grass to within an inch of its life before a thorough combing for the single leaf which might have strayed from a solitary tree a million miles away.

He knew his clients well, and despised them, yet he could never refuse their cast offs. And by accepting what they couldn't bother taking to the tip, Arnold had been lassoed into loyalty to them. Arnold, the good old lawn-mower man who never argued back when his customers nitpicked. He fantasised about planting mines in the freshly shorn lawns while he stuffed the green fleece into hessian sacks for mulch he sold further down the track.

Arnold wanted more. He'd had a gutful of this job. Jesus wept!

He'd been at it for twenty-eight years! There had to be a better way of getting nowhere.

He was a tip rat, his true vocation was scavenging the open tips for anything of value; answerable to no one, although when he brought his precious finds home there was Helen watching him, her silences murderous. Books were the only items she deigned to touch, though she never took ownership of a book. She never said, 'I like this book. I'm going to keep it.' It was always a book on loan, which once read, she insisted on handing back to him.

Arnold didn't care for books, they'd never held any interest for him. But to watch Helen getting stuck into a book like a starving man devouring a roast dinner gave him great satisfaction. Then he knew he had done right for once.

2

The family home had gone missing some years back. Like beach sands sweeping across the ocean's edge to form dunes, so too had the piles, stacks, rows, assemblages and agglomerates of junk floated and covered the interior and exterior of the house. Smothered and choked it to near extinction.

In the now defunct hall, stuff lined its walls completely. In most parts of the house the walls had not been seen for years, covered by sandbanks of newspapers and magazines. Shoeboxes filled with objects ranging from old coins to bottle openers bricked in the windows so that no light or air had entered these rooms for decades.

Junk had bonded with the walls; a core sample layered vertically against the walls would reveal growth rings. It spread across the floors making it difficult for anyone to walk safely around their home.

How could one man accumulate all this stuff? Helen seethed. There was a flow without ebb. She understood the cause of this stuckness, but attempts at getting Arnold to counselling had been futile.

Where in the early days he had held regular garage sales and made a little extra cash, he had long since been unable to let it go. And she hated him for it. The money, little as it was, had been useful. All her married life her family had been living on stewed shoelaces, making do with the grey edges. Stretching their money to the point of shamelessness; every note and coin she handled developed stretch marks.



Many a night Helen would wake to find herself where she'd dropped off to sleep in front of the television, slouched across the arm of the sofa, the TV sending a flickering light show across her in the darkness. She would hoist her body out of the sofa and shuffle across the floor to turn off the set.

The house would be soundless as she stood waiting for her eyes to grow accustomed to the dark, the outline of junk heaps slowly emerging as she began to feel her way around, wondering if there were other women in the world in the same predicament. Was there a middle-aged sleep-deprived woman in China, Scotland or Barbados, prowling her own house in the obscurity of night in search of comfort?

She put off going to her bed because of the nightmares that lay in wait, that left her breathless as they shuddered through her sleep. Daylight brought peace, but the black saddlebags that grew beneath her eyes betrayed her lack of rest.

Throughout the years she had thrown out Arnold's stuff. But everything she threw out was replaced a hundredfold. He was a swift collector. The stuff given to him by people wanting to clear out their garages was bearable. The stuff from deceased estates was altogether different. Why, she raged, did they have to leave their crap behind to haunt her? That their stuff should have an afterlife that cast its lugubrious shadow across their own lives was absurd.

'They can't take it with them. We might as well have it,' Arnold would say.

Fuming, Helen would spit out her case. 'Yes they can. They could get themselves buried in sea containers and take it all with them, crunched up like old car bodies.'

The ghosts of the deceased appeared to Helen in her dreams, demanding the return of their property. One night it would be a television. The next, a watch, a tape measure, a mobile phone. Helen spent her sleep searching for some faceless person's belongings, and

always unsuccessfully. The wraiths withdrew empty-handed, unhappy, even weeping. But not deterred, they returned night after night, and she would wake at five, shaking to the jangling of the clock's alarm.



Arnold never gave up. He tried to get around her with history. Each single item had a history and you don't throw out history. But the moment he started on the history kick Helen would vanish, leaving him addressing a room full of artefacts afflicted with history; stuff that was safe in the knowledge it would never be disposed of—unlike his family.

Once, twenty-eight years ago to be precise, her husband had been someone else; young, with all the features attending youth: bright eyes, concave stomach and smooth skin. He had been blessed with good looks; blond, blue eyed and tall, and an effortless smile framed by dimples. He travelled light. Carrying no burden, he seemed the more attractive for it. And he had had such dreams. Of owning their own farm and being self-sufficient; an idyllic life in the country. Doing great work for mankind and the environment. These dreams he had openly shared with her.

But those dreams did not account for Helen becoming pregnant in their first year. Marriage followed, and a year later Arnold was self-employed as a gardener and they were living in a poor inner city suburb, Helen's mother having begrudgingly paid the deposit on a house. It wasn't much of a deposit, so it wasn't much of a house. They had wanted to live in the country, but their first child, Leif, had soon developed severe asthma. They needed to be near doctors and hospitals.



In the past, when she still talked to him, Helen had ranted about the open tip from which Arnold scavenged and collected stuff to bring

home. But he could always stop her short with, 'Nothing wrong with tips, it's where I found you.'

It was true. They had met at a tip site, each eyeing the other off until Arnold had moved towards her, scavenging as a ruse for getting closer until he had started chatting with an ease that had delighted her. Helen had no previous boyfriends, and was as much relieved as excited that Arnold should pay her special attention. As a young woman, she had regarded herself as dull and unattractive, an image encouraged by her mother's constant carping that Helen had inherited the worst of her father's mongrel DNA.

'My daughter has nothing, nothing, of my family in her!' her mother trumpeted to anyone who would listen. 'Her father died when she was a tot. Saved me from having to leave him.' Then she would shake her head and clear her throat in preparation for the next volley. 'Helen, shoulders straight! Talk about an unfortunate figure! She looks like a dugong. I'm afraid I'm going to be lumbered with her for life. She's twenty years old and not a boyfriend in sight. Oh for god's sake, Helen, speak up! She barely talks. Her father's family were all the same. Quiet as mice, and about as useful.'

Helen, sick at the thought of spending a life with her mother, panicked. When Arnold asked her out, their eyes meeting across a pile of rubbish with seagulls flapping overhead, he had barely got the words out before she had said yes.

Now she shrank with embarrassment at the memory. What in heaven's name had she been doing at the tip? But she knew the answer, looking for books.

Helen was a book addict on a student-teacher's meagre income. In her dreams she ran a second-hand bookshop. She hunted for books wherever she could, in libraries, swap meets, garage sales and op shops. So when a friend suggested checking out the local tip, Helen had jumped at the chance, and found not only a book but, as her mother

added with rolling eyes and a weighty sigh, a husband too. 'Give your children everything and this is what you get. She could have easily married one of the male student teachers,' lamented Helen's mother.

But Arnold was passionate, caring, funny, and smitten by her, paying her endless compliments. He offered not only love but a path for her to follow. She shadowed him. Love is blind and she trusted Arnold to be her guide dog.

When Helen became pregnant, to the overjoyed young couple it seemed as though they'd performed a magic trick. Helen left teachers college, vowing to return one day; she never did.

Their wedding had been a simple affair, or, as Helen's mother put it, 'A non-event.' But when they moved into their rambling asbestos and tile two-storey home on the outer fringes of Fremantle with their first-born, there had still been so much promise, so much future in which to fulfil their aspirations—until the day, eight years later, when their first-born had died from an acute asthma attack.

Too distressed to make sense of anything, Helen and Arnold had been taken home in a taxi organised by the hospital staff. It was a long drive, much longer than the journey in. The driver struggled with condolences but gave up once he realised that it was beyond him to comfort them.

Helen and Arnold said nothing to one another, and the silence was agonisingly reminiscent of other trips going home without their son. But on previous trips back, they had left Leif knowing that he was still alive at the hospital. Now, they could only think of their young son's cold body lying in the morgue.

They remained still, hands in their laps, staring straight ahead as if fearful of looking behind, or sideways. But they knew that Leif's death would follow them no matter which way they looked or turned or whatever they did.

When the taxi pulled up to their driveway, Arnold argued with the driver over paying the fare. The driver didn't want any money.

Arnold insisted, and Helen watched him fishing around in his pockets. He pulled out, along with his hankie and some notes, Leif's inhaler. He held onto the inhaler tightly, and then shoved the notes at the mortified driver.

They stood separately for some moments in front of their home before going in to be greeted by their two younger sons. Astrid their neighbour, who had been looking after the boys, held back, tears in her eyes. Gabriel and Vivian were trembling, frightened by Astrid's emotional state. They sensed something bad had happened, and on seeing their bewildered parents they began to cry.

Helen had leaned heavily against the kitchen sink, trying to remember the normal pattern of a day. A routine to latch on to. Gabriel, who was six, pulled at his mother's skirt. 'Where's Leif, Mum?' Helen remained silent.

Five-year-old Vivian went to his father who was sitting at the kitchen table. 'What did you do with Leif?' he sobbed.

Helen steeled herself as she bent down towards her two young sons. 'Leif has gone to heaven.'

'When's he coming back?' Gabriel said hopefully.

'You never come back from heaven,' Helen replied. She returned to the sink, her back to them, before speaking loudly. 'Leif has gone to heaven. He has become a star. And if you look up at night, out in the yard, you'll see him. He will be the brightest star.'

Apart from the funeral, nothing more was said of Leif's death.

But as youngsters Gabriel and Vivian spent many a night out in the yard looking up at the heavens, trying to pick out their brother in the crowded sky.



Helen read with a disturbing feverishness. How else to cope with Leif's death? Most of the time she didn't know what she was reading.

She just needed to shut herself out from the world. However, she knew that the raw wound of sorrow was forming a scab when the books she was reading began to make sense.

Astrid and her husband took care of Gabriel and Vivian until Helen began to surface. Still, she continued reading, but less as an antidote for her grief and more, over the years, for the nightmares that chased her through the night. She woke each morning at five, carefully wriggling her body up to switch on the reading lamp and pick up her book from the bedside table. Then she read, her hands caressing each page, until daylight and its fellow traveller, reality, crept across the room to steal her peace away.

As she heard the fast-approaching feet of Gabriel and Vivian she would steel herself. And as the boys clambered onto the bed she would switch off the reading lamp, lay her book down, and swing into action, sustained for the day ahead.



Arnold's grief, though, took a different course. He had found a way of submerging his sadness and it didn't take long before the tide of junk was lapping around his family's ankles.

3

Astrid was bustling around her kitchen, organising cocoa, toasted sandwiches, a heater and a blanket. As she sat at the kitchen table Helen reflected on the fight she'd had with Arnold the night before: ugly, inevitable and delivering yet another resounding blow to their marriage.

She had been in the kitchen making bread when she heard Arnold's familiar shuffle. Kneading the dough, she'd fixed her gaze on the floury mass in her hands. She didn't want to have to look at her husband; she dreaded to think what alien object he might be bringing in this time.

Arnold came in with a snuffle of contentment; he loved Helen's homemade bread. But his snuffle only fuelled her anger. She pummelled the dough, refusing to raise her head as he stood before her.

'Guess what I got ya.'

'I'd rather not,' said Helen. What was he thinking? She wasn't stupid. Got her? Whatever he got her, he got for himself.

'Have a look then.'

Helen took the bait. She flipped her head up and nearly choked. 'What the hell is that?'

Arnold, unsettled, replied, 'It's a photograph album.'

Helen stood, flour-covered arms folded in front of her like a bread knot. Her eyes popped disbelievingly at the large album with its faded cloth cover as she yelled, 'I can see what it is. More damned junk!'

'It's not junk ... it's a photograph album.'

Helen shook her head in disbelief. Of all things to bring home! Didn't Arnold know how painfully few photographs they possessed of Gabriel and Vivian? There were only a couple of Leif.

'Remember Mrs Slap?' Arnold said.

Indeed she remembered Mrs Slap; she had spoken, often, over the phone to the old lady about overdue lawn-mowing accounts. 'Don't tell me! She's dead. And out of gratitude, her relatives gave you her old photograph album?'

'Yeah,' whispered Arnold.

Helen couldn't speak. She screamed. 'It is not gratitude, Arnold. It's offloading their crap on to a sap!'

'Dead people don't leave you brand new things. They give you things to remember them by.'

'You already have a million photograph albums,' Helen hissed through gritted teeth.

'Well this one,' said Arnold, tapping his finger onto the album. 'This one is in particularly good condition.'

'Humph!' Helen landed a punch into the dough.

Arnold was holding the album open for her. She leaned forward and noticed it was an expensive album with its black, matt pages littered with little white triangles for holding the photographs in place. Between the pages there was tissue paper.

The book fell open at a page with two large black and white photographs. One was of a family sitting on what looked to be a front lawn; a mother and father surrounded by a huddle of young children. The house behind them was opulent, the surrounding gardens lush and well tended. It would have been a sunny day, for everyone was wearing summer clothing and squinting against the glare of the sun. And they were all smiling. They were happy, with their arms linked around one another.

In the photograph opposite, taken in the lounge room perhaps, a small boy, a toddler, was sitting on a woman's lap, her hands around

his waist holding him securely. Her smile was serene, her composure almost regal. And somehow it seemed that the little boy knew he had a perfect mother, for he appeared to be absolutely content there, his small hands resting on hers.

Helen compared the two photos. Yes, the mother and son were also in the happy family snap. Her shoulders slumped. The photographs hammered home what she didn't have—a happy family. And what she'd lost—a son. How daft can a man be, she thought, bringing home a photograph album with photos of total strangers. Happy total strangers!

She said, a tremor in her voice, 'It's the junk, Arnold, the junk or me. You've got three weeks to clear the lot out, or I go for good.'

Arnold scratched his head in bewilderment. Three weeks? What was she talking about? He had never seen her so distressed. She was crying as if she'd chopped onions all day.

'I do not want that thing in my house. Get rid of it!' Helen shouted, her index finger pointing the way out. Arnold stood immobile, holding the album to his chest.

'Get it out!' Helen screamed, and picking up the lump of dough she hurled it with all her might.

The doughy missile flew straight past Arnold and landed smack in his collection of teapots on top of the kitchen cabinet. Teapots were sent flying.

Helen waited for a response, but might as well have been waiting for hell to freeze over. Nothing would move this man. Not reason, not anger, not even death by a two-kilo wholegrain doughy missile.

'Three weeks, Arnold. You have three weeks to clear out every single item you have brought into this house over the last twenty years. It's me or the junk, Arnold.' But even as she uttered the words, she knew which way the scales would tip. Knew who would be leaving. Threats were wasted on Arnold.

Silence filled the kitchen like deadly gas. They stood motionless, both were in shock. Helen for having spoken what she had only thought for so long. Arnold for her threat of leaving and for seeing his teapots shattered. Putting the photograph album aside he began picking up the bits and pieces from the floor.

Helen marched into the lounge room where she sat and cried, spreading small doughy pieces over her face as she wiped the tears away. She didn't know where to put herself. She hit out at the piles of objects around her until, unexpectedly, her sense of outrage turned to a profound sadness. She knew Arnold would never move any of his stuff. Her threat had been more about her. She'd drawn a line in the sand. It was time to turn the sign to 'closed' on this marriage.

She sat weeping under Arnold's formidable collection of clocks. Some still worked, but their ticking brought little consolation to one of her bleakest hours.

Arnold meanwhile had come upon the lump of dough. After carefully picking out the dust, the debris, and the broken china, he finished kneading it, then divided it into two, plopping each piece into a baking tin, and finishing them off with a brush of egg yolk. He slid them into the oven and decided to sit and wait until they were done.

His mind was numb. He looked at the photograph album now sitting on the kitchen table. It looked harmless enough. Why had Helen reacted so strongly? He opened it to the page that held the two photographs. Was she upset by another family's happiness? He closed the album. He felt as though his life was coming apart. He loved Helen but she had shut him out of her life a long time ago. Sitting by the warmth of the oven, his eyes filmed over with tears. He blinked them back.

Soon the smell of baking bread permeated the house, making Helen feel even more vengeful. She went to bed. Later she heard

Arnold shuffle to her bedroom door with a tray which he set down without a knock or a word. When she heard his steps drift away she got up and opened the door and took the tray back to her bed. There was a cup of tea and a plate with thick slices of freshly baked bread and honey. The bread had risen well and was baked to perfection.

She felt angry that she couldn't eat this beautiful bread soaked with butter and honey. Only anger was on her tastebuds.

A stupid photograph album, with photos of a strange family in it! How perverse, where photos of Leif would barely fill one page; the empty pages a constant reminder of a life cut short, and parents too poor to afford even a camera. No happy family snaps for them.

Helen picked up the bread from her plate and threw it across the room. It hit the wall, and she watched its sticky descent. She suspected Mrs Slap would visit her tonight, demanding her album back. Helen spoke out defensively in the dimness of her bedroom.

'Well, have it back you old hag! Go on take it.'

Her eye fell on the bread, it had reached the carpet. Dammit, she was hungry! She could not let good food go to waste. She slid out of her bed and collected the mess, shoving the slices into her mouth.