

ROBERT MCGILL

## The Widower's House

REBECCA WAS EATING DINNER in Dahl's kitchen when the telephone rang. It was the real estate agent, wanting to know how she was. She swished split-pea soup in her mouth and listened to him talk a while before asking what he wanted. He spluttered a bit, as though it had been him eating the soup, then said something had come up in her price range, a man named Warren wanting to rent his top floor. The agent said the house was in the style of a country home.

"Really? What country?" Rebecca asked. She'd grown up on a farm and didn't have much time for places they called country homes nowadays. But she got Dahl to drive her out anyhow and found the agent had been right. It was red brick with a veranda and had probably really been a farmhouse at first, but it was close to the city and the surrounding fields were overgrown with suburbs. Every other house on the street had a Swiss roof or Corinthian columns—one of them actually had both—and the lawns were still dirt and seed. There were no trees. In the middle of the agent's tour, Rebecca looked out through the bedroom window and had a sudden fear that this building was the only solid thing in sight. If you knocked it down, the whole unrooted subdivision was liable to blow off the map. Dahl stood next to her, asking about utilities, and the agent, whose smile had disappeared the moment Dahl stepped out of the car, was equivocating and running a hand over his toupee. Rebecca declared that she was ready to sign.

"So is Warren his first name or his last?" asked Dahl when she'd moved in. It was just a dodge, she knew, to avoid talking about the fact that he was still angry—not so much about the distance from his apartment and the isolation of the place as about the fact that she'd decided on it by herself.

She told him it was the last name. The man's first name was Bram. Dahl wanted to know if Bram had come up for any late-night meetings with his new tenant.

"I bet he's already offered to install mirrors on your ceiling, right?"

"Bite your tongue," she said. "His wife just died." From where she sat at the side of the bed she could see Bram in the back yard, pulling weeds from the garden.

The real estate agent had said the yard was off-limits; it was one of the owner's stipulations. That had been in her mind the whole time the day before while Bram gave her a tour of the ground floor where he lived after running into her at the bottom of her staircase. She'd wondered what else might be out of bounds, what rooms undisclosed, but he seemed to show her everything.

"This is usually the living room," he said. There was a double bed in the middle of it. "I'm sleeping here while the new bedroom gets built at the back." A coffee table had been pulled up beside the bed, and on it there was a lamp and a framed photograph of a woman kneeling in a garden. She wore jeans and a sweater and a wide-brimmed yellow hat that covered long, frizzled grey hair. The furrows of soil underneath her looked bare—it must have been planting season. She was turned towards the camera, her eyes wide but bright, as though someone familiar had just called her name.

Rebecca looked up at the ceiling. "So my kitchen is above your living room, right?" she said. He nodded, and she worried that her comment sounded ignorant, as though she were really asking and not just talking out loud. "It's neat to think about the overlap between the two floors," she explained.

The bathrooms were one on top of the other. The old bedroom, under her sitting room, had been filled with lumber and tools and drop-cloths. At the back was a study under her bedroom.

"I spend most of the afternoons in here," he said. She was impressed by the number of volumes on the shelves and had to catch herself from looking at the titles. It was a bad habit honed by too many bookstores, and it might seem nosy.

"Why are you building a new bedroom?" she asked. He paused before answering, and she realized this might be nosy, too.

"Oh, you know," he finally said, tiredly. "You get sick of things." The woman in the photograph had looked happy, Rebecca

suddenly thought, and she couldn't manage anything to say. When Bram told her he'd been heading out to work in the garden, she apologized for the intrusion and left. If that had been her chance to fish for an invitation to the back yard, she'd missed it.

"Maybe he buried her out there," said Dahl, lying beside her on the bed. "Maybe that's why he keeps everybody away." When Dahl saw the face Rebecca made at that, he rolled over and began to kiss her neck. She knew this was part of a game he played: offend, then seduce. Win forgiveness by changing the topic. The rules said she had to repel this energetic advance, tame him, then accept his second, tender offer. She hated these rules, she hated the fact that she'd been complicit in sustaining them. There must have been some first instance when she should have recognized what was happening, when she could have told him she was choosing not to play.

She didn't push him away like she was supposed to, she let him kiss her cheek, her ear, work a hand under her shirt and up her back. Sometimes there wasn't the energy to extract oneself from sex. It needed its own vigour, but that came from some separate reserve, one she could access, it seemed, even when she wanted anything but that. Within a few minutes he'd really won, because she forgot herself in it, and things became loud. Him especially. Sometimes that was nice, but most other times it annoyed her. When he wanted to let her know that she was doing something right, the phrase he used was "Oh God," but he exhaled sharply as he said it and it came out as "Oh Cod." This could be devastating. Just at the point that she was beginning to enjoy herself and breathing hard, he'd utter "Oh Cod" and she either found it so funny or so irritating that she fell out of rhythm and lost the feeling entirely. He didn't seem to notice.

It was almost three-thirty when they finished. Dahl was hours late for work—he'd only asked for the morning off. Once they'd dressed, she accompanied him down the stairs and out to his truck. Then, after the vehicle had reached the end of the driveway, she turned around to see Bram standing outside the front door in his work-clothes, watching her. He didn't say hello immediately, but only looked at her as she walked towards him.

A horrible feeling dawned on her. He might have been in the study underneath the bedroom. He might have heard her and Dahl.

“Good afternoon, Bram,” she said, trying to sound cheerful and carefree, once she was a few steps away. He nodded in return. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” he said. “I’m going out to the garden to pick some beets.” She was sure she detected an impatience in his voice.

“Oh. Well, I won’t keep you, then.” She shuffled quickly to the side of the walk, but she still wasn’t far enough out of the way and he went by her sideways, his solid body pressing lightly against her back. When he was on the gravel, he stopped and turned.

“You’re welcome to come help if you’d like,” he said. “You could keep what you picked.”

“Beets,” she said. “That would be nice.” She realized she sounded uncertain; she was still thinking about what he might have heard.

Rebecca and Bram worked side by side. He showed her the proper way to pull the beets out of the ground, not by the stems but by digging with a trowel and applying leverage underneath. It was cool and damp for August. Rebecca had changed into an old pair of overalls and a windbreaker, and she was glad. She’d wanted to shower, too, was conscious of clinging odours, but had decided it was better not to keep him waiting.

“That was your boyfriend in the truck.” He said it kindly but flatly, like a superannuated census-taker. That’s what must happen to you when you’ve lost somebody, thought Rebecca. You get tired of answers. Bram continued to work with the trowel as he spoke, and she followed his lead by keeping her eyes on the soil when she replied.

“Yes, he’s my partner,” she amended carefully. Sometimes it was an effort to correct men on things like this, but she didn’t like “boyfriend.” It was always wielded as condescension, or accusation, or both.

“Yes, partner, of course,” Bram murmured, and said nothing more. She watched him slide the trowel into the soil. The flesh on his fingers was tight and smooth between the knuckles, thin but muscular-looking, like the rest of him. His hair was still brown.

The two of them were halfway along the row. There were other lines of beets in the garden, but Bram said he wanted to pick only this one today. Then he asked her what she did.

She told him she was an artist. To forestall any more questions, she added that all of her work was web-based; that was why she'd needed a cable installed when she moved in. He nodded, and she thought that would be it. People over fifty never wanted to know anything more when you mentioned the Internet. But he began to ask her more: how she'd started in the field, what other media she used. He nodded when she said she was just out of college, and he wanted to know which one.

"My wife took some painting courses a few years ago, is why I'm asking," he explained. "She was an artist too."

"Oh, I didn't know," said Rebecca, suddenly uncomfortable.

"She had a studio upstairs, where your kitchen is now," Bram said. He told her he was a carpenter; he'd just retired, and he'd done the renovations on the second floor himself. "The light's good in that room in the morning. She liked to paint in there then." Rebecca replied that she wouldn't know; she preferred to work at night and sleep through the morning. It was an offhand remark and she wasn't expecting a reaction, but he grunted.

"Everybody has their habits, I guess," he said soberly. "I'm not much for night time myself." Then his mouth reset itself into a smile between his gaunt cheeks. "Hard to pick beets in the dark."

"Yes," she agreed, "they hate being woken up." A silly joke, but he chuckled, and everything was all right.

They'd filled the bottom of his bushel basket by the time they finished the row.

"Here, how many would you like?" he asked as they walked back to the front of the house.

"No, I couldn't, it was my pleasure," she said. "You did all the work, I watched more than anything else." But he took three of the biggest ones, brushed off some of the soil and loaded them into her arms.

That night she slept by herself and dreamed about Bram, motionless in a small room with red, sloping walls, his chin drawn into his neck. Rebecca was watching him from above, and it seemed like nothing was going to happen, ever, until without warning, there was a tremendous crash like the pounding of an enormous drum. She awoke with a start and discovered the pounding was real. It was thrumming in her ears, her whole body—a stubborn hammering that had invaded the bedroom.

After a moment she realized it was coming from below, outside the house. She rolled over and looked at her alarm clock. It

was just after seven. She groaned, crawled out of bed and went to the window. When she looked down, she saw Bram below her, standing in the skeletal frame of the new bedroom that jutted from the back of the house, driving nails into a plank.

She couldn't believe it. She'd worked until three, hadn't been able to fall asleep until after four. She'd told him that she usually slept in; he must know how loud he was being. Not only that, but there were rules, noise restrictions. She imagined storming out to complain.

But in her fantasy of how it would go, it didn't work. It would be too hurtful, too disjunctive with their other meetings. Besides, maybe this was normal. Bram was a carpenter; he must know the by-laws. She was more awake now and began to slip out of outrage into uncertainty. Maybe she wasn't justified, maybe he'd forgotten their talk about sleeping hours. It probably wasn't meant as a slight at all; just a little thoughtless.

Then she remembered about her and Dahl the previous afternoon. Perhaps this was retribution for their carelessness. At college she'd shared a house with people who were in relationships, and she knew the humiliation of thin walls and overheard passion. She'd constructed revenge fantasies once or twice herself. She hadn't gone through with them, though, at least not in so direct a fashion as this—if that was what Bram was doing. She sighed, pulled on a housecoat and trudged down the hallway to make coffee.

When she left the apartment after lunch to check the mail, there was a bundle of beets at the top of the stairs. She smiled, left them where they lay and went down, stepping outside and glancing at Bram's front window to see if he was there. It had been a surprisingly productive morning; she was working on the art for a used-car dealership's web-page and had accomplished more already than she usually did in a full day. The ideas had been flowing, things were getting done, and the gift of the beets dissolved the last of her anger. She wanted to thank him. But he'd drawn the curtains on the living room. The neighbours would wonder about this, she thought. They'd probably think it was a sign of mourning, that it was some holdover from another century that went along with owning this kind of house. And perhaps that's what it was.

He met her again at the bottom of the stairs as she was sorting through the bills.

"We're making this a bit of a habit," she said.

"There are worse habits," he replied. "I'm glad, this gives me the chance to invite you for lunch." She told him she'd just eaten but wouldn't mind some tea, and she followed him in.

His floor was different from the last time: all the doors had been pulled shut. He led her into the kitchen and put on the kettle.

"How's the bedroom coming?" she asked, and he began to talk about the process, how the foundation had been laid a month ago, how he was hoping to have the frame of the walls done by the end of the week. That was it. No hesitation from either of them, no mention of the morning. It was a relief more than anything else. When she finally left, she realized she'd forgotten to thank him for the beets.

The next morning it was the same. Another staccato betrayal that sent her bolt upright in bed at seven o'clock, another gift of beets on her doorstep. And every morning like that, for the next two weeks. She'd told him she was a vegetarian, and he pleased her not only with beets but carrots, cabbage, tomatoes. After the hammering and the vegetable gifts, the third ritual was tea in his kitchen, once he'd finished his work for the day and she'd checked the mail for both of them. They talked about everything but the other two rituals.

"If you could have anything in the world, what would it be?" she asked him one time.

"Well," he said slowly, and drew in a breath. At first she'd thought this pace of his in speech was a sign of apathy or laziness, but it seemed to be just his way. "I suppose a pick-up truck like the one your partner has."

That wasn't what he was going to say, she thought. There'd been another answer lying there behind it, one he would never speak. But gaps were what relationships were all about. The dead wives, the hammering, the silent, blatant pleas. He never entertained her outside the kitchen and never asked to come up. On several occasions she'd almost invited him—she wanted to reciprocate as host—but he'd never expressed any interest in visiting her. That day, she went to give him a hug good-bye and he stooped to tie his shoe lace when she drew near.

"I had a nice time today," he said from the floor. "Please, come by again."



Why was he doing it, the hammering and the vegetables together? She wondered if one was the corrective for the other. Maybe they were supposed to cancel each other out, waves of affection and spite flattening into indifference. It didn't feel like that. It felt like a ripping from two different directions. But there was no more daytime sex with Dahl; she wouldn't allow it. Even if that was the reason for the hammering, the punishment far outweighed the crime, but something in her insisted that she'd give Bram no more cause for retribution. It was an easy decision for her in other ways, too. Dahl visited less and less often during the day anyhow, hampered by office hours and the lack of invitations. But he kept coming after dark. It was his last and most fundamental claim on her, she thought, and he seemed to know it. On those nights she got very little rest, but she was glad at least that Bram's early mornings meant he'd be out of the study underneath them and sleeping by the time Dahl came over. Not that sex was all he would have heard, some nights.

"What's going on? I thought we were partners," Dahl said angrily when she told him she couldn't see him for a while, that she was too busy with work. He'd given up teasing her about Bram; there were other things worrying him now. It would be worse if he knew about the tea, or the vegetables, or Rebecca's dreams. But Dahl didn't know about anything, of course, except the bare fact of the hammer's wake-up calls, since sometimes he was in bed with her when they happened. He didn't even mind them, since they coincided with the time he had to get up for work. He never would have linked them with the afternoon sex if Rebecca hadn't mentioned it.

"That's pretty unlikely," he said. "You know, you worry too much about all the maybes in life. Maybe this, maybe that. You end up living in between two worlds, and you don't spend much time in either one." By the end of it he'd turned things around enough to make it seem like he was happy to leave. "This might be good for both of us," he said, and slammed the door.

She'd wondered if she would find it hard, not seeing him. They'd been together almost a year now, and already the picture of life without him had blurred. The move to the country—to the suburbs, at least—had been possible only because of an urgent



feeling that something was dead. She'd needed to get out of the city to hear properly when she checked the pulse, and she'd been right: there was nothing but the occasional throb of sex. She went seven days without him and, almost guiltily, felt no regret at all.

"Is it comfortable living up there?" Bram wanted to know. "Anything you need, you tell me." He sat across from her at his kitchen table, gripping his mug, and the sun ducked below the window frame to pool light between them. Lately, tea together had begun to stretch late into the afternoons.

"It's fine," she replied. "What about you? It must be different, having someone you don't know living above you."

"Oh, I know you now, don't I?" he said softly. They both smiled.

"Yes, of course. I just meant ...."

"I know what you meant." His eyes wandered to the screen door across the room, and she felt him slipping away as he sometimes did. Then he got up and went to rinse out his cup in the sink. She followed him.

"You should sell this place," she said. He turned around at the nearness of her voice, nodded slowly. He was a full head taller than she was and bent his face to look at her. She could feel his breath on her forehead, her neck. His eyes were brown and drooping, with long, fascinating lashes, longer than she'd seen on a man.

"I should," he said. "I should go off to California."

"I hear it's nice," she offered. "Lots of artists."

"Lots of old codgers like me, too," he said, and they laughed.

"That's what they say," she agreed. "I've never been there."

"You should come with me, then," he said, his smile widening. She moved her hands up towards his shoulders.

"Only if you promise not to wake me up every morning with hammering," she said, laughing.

Her voice faded as she watched his face harden. He stepped back.

"What? What does that mean?" he said. She blanched, realizing she'd misjudged. She'd thought the tone was right. She'd thought that in this intimacy he'd want to dispel the old agreed-upon illusions. But he just wanted to build on them.

"You know what it means," she said. "You know better than I do. I've been wanting to ask you what it means for weeks now." She stepped towards him. "What are you trying to tell me with that

pounding, Bram? What are you afraid of? We haven't even shaken hands."

"What would you have us do?" he asked. He was giving nothing away, leaving nothing exposed. She felt herself flapping around like leaves.

"I ... have a boyfriend," she stammered.

"I thought he was your partner," he said sarcastically, and turned around. But that only left him facing the wall; he had nowhere to go. It was a poor strategic gesture, too melodramatic, and her recognition of that gave her enough of an upper hand to walk out quickly, before he could turn back.

"I'll be over right away," Dahl told her that night when she called him.

She got them both drunk, that was the easiest way, but not drunk enough for her to forget her purpose or for Dahl to forget his. Then she led him to the kitchen at the front of the house and unbuckled his belt in the darkness, began to work at the shirt.

"On the table?" he gasped between breaths, excited by the new location, clumsily trying to beat her to the bottom buttons. It was a tottery old thing with a dictionary propping up one leg.

"No," she said, and pushed him to the floor. It was fortunate that he was far enough gone not to notice the dirt, long shaken from vegetables and ground into the linoleum. Cleaning had never been a priority for her.

She made sure it was loud. That was simple enough; Dahl was always quick to follow her lead, even quicker and more eager now that he was drunk and he was here in her space and it had been more than a week for him. She focused on the floor beneath her until it felt like she was actually being pushed into it, through it. She was sure that Bram, looking up right now from his bed in the living room, would be able to see her back, her legs, digging down through the ceiling. The rhythmic cries of Dahl's voice were painfully, triumphantly loud. Bram could have heard them from the garden.

The hammering was back in the morning, stronger than ever. A sign, she thought immediately. But then she listened more carefully and frowned. Perhaps not, after all. Perhaps it was just a

consequence of the alcohol. She got up, went to the kitchen and looked at the floor guiltily. Dahl had already left without waking her; the coffee pot was half-full and a washed mug drying beside the sink. She poured a bowl of corn flakes and sat down at the kitchen table where weeks ago she'd set up her computer, taking it from her bedroom desk where the hammering was too loud for work. But she couldn't concentrate even in the relative quiet. She wasn't a horrible person, she thought. Bram had to know that; and if he didn't know, he had to be told.

She waited until midday, an hour after the noise had stopped, then went downstairs. His door was unlocked. She didn't ring the bell; she didn't want to give him the chance to turn her away. She walked straight down the hall, past the living room, past his kitchen to the study door and pushed it open. She stopped short.

"Oh," she said.

In the middle of the study was a double bed—Bram's bed, the same one that had once been in the living room. It was unmade, the sheets hanging off the side closest to the door and the pillow thrown on the middle. It suddenly occurred to her that Bram had been sleeping here for weeks, below her bedroom. It was even in the same orientation as her bed directly above it. The lamp was on the corner of the desk near the headboard. Beside it was the picture of the woman in the garden.

He was behind her, she sensed, and she turned around. He just stood there, unblinking, frowning absently.

"Why did you move the bed?" she asked quietly. He said nothing, and in that moment she realized the answer. She could see him searching out some excuse, some defence or rationale, a story that could save them both from the truth. But he didn't say anything. He didn't need to, really. She was already mentally reconstructing the past month, his every night lying here below them.

"Do you want me in your bed? Is that what you want?"

He shook his head—whether in denial or confusion, Rebecca couldn't tell, and she wondered if there was a decision before her. But already, before she could make it, her arms were reaching out for him. She watched them rise and offer themselves.

He didn't move into them. He wasn't even shaking his head any more. He only stood there, like a pillar of salt.

It was late that night, well after dark, when Dahl pulled into the long, deep drive to the old man's house. He didn't know what to expect. It was the second time in as many nights that Rebecca had summoned him. But while last night she'd been energetic, seductive, tonight her voice had been quiet and uneven.

He went to kiss her when he reached the top of the stairs, but she took his hands and led him down the hall to the bedroom, then detached herself and began to undress in front of him slowly, her eyes turned away from where he stood. He watched until she had only her underwear left, and then he bent down and tugged at his socks, pulled out his shirt tails, hurrying to catch up.

She was on top of him and he was listening to her voice. They fascinated him, the sounds a woman made in the act of love. Some shrieked with him as though he were hitting them with a shovel, and others panted in a parody of labour. Rebecca's voice now was all deep in her throat, almost wheezing. It connected them with the house, with the wind through the rafters in the attic, the creak of the floorboards and bedsprings and joints as they all rocked together. And when it quickened and increased, they all lifted and accelerated with it, and his voice too beginning to join in, echoing off the walls.

Then, to his surprise, his echo became louder. Strangely, it grew more frantic even as his voice fell away. Dahl stopped moving, but Rebecca didn't. She and the echo continued on in synchrony, Rebecca wheezing and it echoing from underneath them, pushing through cracks in the floor, rising through the bed. Dahl closed his mouth and listened to them, the man's cries that were not his, as they embraced hers. Two voices greeting, distant and together, calling out one for another.