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Other People's Houses

I knew the property I recently purchased was distressed, but not that squatters and drug addicts had taken it over.

"The police try rousting them," my realtor, Jackie, said over the phone. "But they keep coming back. The place has become a 24/7 crack house. And they're ripping out floorboards, plumbing, and copper wiring for their resale value."

"What do you suggest?" I asked.

She paused. "Take extralegal measures. Hire private security, a firm not averse to—"

"Okay," I said. "I get it. Do what you have to."

Weeks later I attended the open house. Other neighborhoods had succumbed to gentrification, but on this block residents galvanized to resist. Nonetheless, at least a dozen people defied the demonstrators and crossed their picket line.

Jackie greeted visitors in the foyer, distributing glossy brochures and asking guests to remove their shoes before entering the rest of the house. Several young men flanked her, thickly tattooed beneath muscle shirts—local gang members, obviously, hired by that security firm.

The large Italianate residence, built in the 1920s, had been home to a famous movie director, though the neighborhood had been in decline for decades. Jackie oversaw the house's restoration, and I neither interfered nor stopped by to observe her progress. I managed many business interests, and while I'd never worked with Jackie, her reputation was stellar.

Tragedy and scandal marred the film director's short if brilliant career. Tried and convicted of statutory rape, he slit his wrists in his bathtub rather than go to prison. None of this Jackie mentioned in her brochure, but every guest lingered in the master bathroom as if hoping to glimpse bloodstains.

These people, I thought, were gawkers and curiosity seekers. And so it surprised me when, after the tour ended, Jackie showed me several visitors' bids which matched or exceeded our asking price.

To celebrate I invited her to dinner.

We ate at an upscale restaurant on the waterfront. I ordered Alaskan King crab legs, Kuomoto oysters, and champagne, while Jackie stuck mostly to her lemon quinoa salad and carbonated water.

I asked how she knew the open house would be so successful. She replied evasively, alluding to "proprietary algorithms" and "a private client list." I pressed no further but determined to revisit the subject with her later.

I then asked Jackie how her auditions were going. Like many young people, she'd come to the city to pursue a film career. She twirled her salad fork, frowning at the shred of lettuce that drooped from its tines like a limp flag.

"Remember the 1930s Buzz Berkeley musicals?" she said. "The kaleidoscopic dance numbers and synchronized swimming? There's a new TV program, a musical comedy, I tried out for that's partly an homage to Buzz Berkeley. They asked me back for a second audition, but I'm not sure I'll go."

Jackie had been a competitive swimmer and studied dance and music at Juilliard. "Why not?" I said. "The show sounds perfect for you."

"I fell into real estate as a sideline, more lucrative, say, than waiting tables or driving for Uber. But it's been ten years since I moved to the city, and even if I got the role, how many more will there be for a performer over thirty?"

She was right. The film industry's "sell-by date" was brutal and unforgiving. At least she'd found a career to fall back on.

"If you're interested," I said, "I've another property to show you."

The house where I'd been staying was built atop a canyon rim with soaring views of the city, mountains, and ocean. Mostly glass and stone, it rose on slender girders to jut into the sky. But recent heavy rains and an earthquake had dislodged many nearby homes and threatened to slide mine into the canyon too.

I hired a contractor to shore up the foundation and support beams, but work hadn't yet begun. And, despite city inspectors' warnings—they'd strung yellow "do not cross" tape throughout the house—I didn't vacate. My

contractor assured me the second level—master bedroom, deck, swimming pool—was still safe, though he suggested I drain the pool, which I couldn't bear to do.

I grabbed a bottle of wine from the kitchen and led Jackie through the master bedroom and outside. I sat in a deck chair while Jackie walked toward the pool. It was large, if not Olympic-sized, teardrop-shaped with a three-meter-high diving board near the deep end. She stepped lightly, not warily as if testing the deck boards, but like a trained athlete or dancer, with assurance and poise.

She stepped round the yellow tape that festooned the diving board and mounted the first rung.

Jackie wore a sports bra and denim shorts. I suggested she might want a bathing costume, of which I had several that might fit.

"It's warm enough," she said. "My clothes will dry."

"Suit yourself."

She kicked off her sandals and climbed several more rungs. Then, suddenly, a jolt and rumble in the earth sent shock waves racing across the pool's surface. Jackie turned to me.

"A 4.0, I guess," I said, "depending on the epicenter."

"How many—"

"Once or twice daily, though they're usually smaller. Don't you get them in the Valley?" She lived in Glendale thirty miles away.

"Probably. Not that I'd notice." She clambered to the top rung, "But then I don't usually climb a high-board teetering near the edge of a cliff."

Then Jackie surprised me—and perhaps herself. She sprang into a hand-stand and leaped into the air, somersaulting twice, jackknifing once, and then plunging into the water, barely making a splash.

Moments passed. I jumped to my feet and craned my neck, fearing that nine feet of water might not be enough. Then Jackie burst to the surface, gasping for breath.

She got out, trotted over, and sat beside me, soaked and trembling. I got up to retrieve a bathrobe from the house. Returning, I wrapped it around her. But the air had turned cool, with fog swirling from the canyon and the sun vanishing behind clouds, and so we returned inside the house.

In the kitchen I made an omelet, thinking she was hungry. As Jackie sat at the table, plates and silverware began rattling.

"Another 4.0?" she asked.

I nodded. "You're getting good."

She frowned. "I don't think I can sell the house. Even retrofitted, how many years can it last?"

"In Japan, houses last twenty, thirty years tops. Think of the views here. Think of the disposable wealth many people have."

"And you don't fear for their safety?"

"*Caveat emptor*. Besides, didn't you forcefully evict—even terrorize—squatters and homeless at the other house?"

"You're right," Jackie said. "What am I doing with my life?" She sobbed and lowered her head in her arms.

Though I'd hoped she'd spend the night, Jackie left before sunset. I consoled myself. The city was full of people on the make, especially young women. I made another omelet and took it outside onto the deck.

The fog retreated into the box and side canyons below, while the moon rose over the ocean. Lights flared in other people's houses. But they seemed like fireflies, ephemeral and distant.

I braced myself, feeling a tremor. But it was only the deck, buffeted by the breeze, swaying and creaking.

The pool glinted, steam rising. (I'd turned on the heater.) I peeled off my clothes and, naked, rushed over and plunged in the deep end.

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