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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-nine 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.

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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, whippersnippers, 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.

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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-nine 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. Here 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