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RICHARD HAD NEVER broken the law, not even a speeding ticket, but opening the door to his home—still mine, he told himself—felt like a burglary.

Sliding into the darkened mud room, he tripped over a doormat the realtor had apparently brought, to scrape the feet of strangers. “Fuck,” he muttered, wondering if anyone heard him. And then, realizing how absurd that was, louder: “Fuck!”

The buyers’ walk-through would happen the next morning, the realtor said, so tonight was the last opportunity to retrieve anything that remained. Floors should be broom-clean. Bedroom and bath doors left open. Leave the keys on the kitchen counter.

Twenty-seven years ago, was the house so pristine? He tried to recall the day he brought Annie here, the two of them barely married, infatuated with each other and with the idea of owning a home. At first, she hesitated to disturb the order of the three-bedroom Victorian. The dining room chandelier was too formal. “Let’s live with it for now,” she said. She sighed at the inconvenient placement of a closet rod until one day Richard sawed the thing out.

Now he wandered the first floor, looking for evidence of damage that might be noticed in the morning. Signs of former life. The empty space magnified the squeak of a kitchen drawer he’d never been able to quiet.

A certain amount of wear and tear was to be expected. Houses, like people, eventually reveal their age. When he renovated the living room three years ago, Richard justified it as a cost that would be necessary over time. Deferred maintenance catches up with you, he told Annie. Which seemed darkly ironic after she became ill. The organic-food fanatic, who popped nutritional supplements like candy, the woman who never, ever smoked a cigarette, he was sure of it, who ran a marathon before anyone heard of Joan Benoit, had concealed a tumor behind an innocuous lobe of her left lung. The chances, right?

The discovery was confirmed in the office of a Boston oncologist. Richard could still picture the desk, almost feel the brushed steel edges he’d gripped as if to steady himself. Now, touching familiar brass doorknobs in Maine, Richard thought of that afternoon as a possession, one of a

Pickpocket

BY WILLIAM HALL



trove, his to guard.

He was glad to see the house had fared well in the months since his departure. The chair rails and built-in china cabinet had been refinished last year and still looked fresh. The fireplace and flue looked clean.

In the cellar, Richard examined the water level of the furnace, then peered in dark corners for mouse droppings. Last winter, he discovered a family of field mice down here, squatters come in from the cold. But the concrete floor was bare, its only occupant Richard’s workbench, which the buyers had agreed to keep. Too big for his condominium, and his two daughters had husbands and workbenches of their own.

Upstairs, the house was colder. Richard tapped the thermostat and then began checking the windows.

In their bedroom, the pocket door had been a find, overlooked when Richard and Annie first toured the house. The listing agent had pointed out the unexpected feature. Hidden within the wall of what had been a dressing area, the door hung from a track and slid to seal off the space. The privacy was only partial, but sometimes, in the last, terrible weeks before hospice, when Annie moaned in pain as she slept, Richard would take a quilt and escape to the love seat here. He never confessed his absence, just waited the next morning for her to ask, but if she knew, Annie had said nothing.

Tonight, his retreat was exposed as he had left it. Still, by habit, Richard grasped the flush-mounted metal pull and slid the pocket door shut. The heavy oak panel moved as smoothly as ever on its track. The sensation was like a fingerprint. Then, as he was about to push the door back into the

wall, there was rustling, a friction. A scrap of paper somehow protruded from the narrow space beneath the door.

Richard picked up the scrap as if it were dangerous. He recognized the bluish tint: a receipt, imprinted at a time when every American Express card was inserted in a cumbersome, sliding, manual device. Annie’s name, in full. Even “Hildred,” which she disliked and always abbreviated. How strange to see her name this way again, as it appeared in the obituary.

The name of the restaurant was familiar, a landmark on the local waterfront. But the date was indecipherable, the tendered amount mysterious. \$55.21? What kind of a meal had that purchased? Not one he had shared—he would have paid.

Richard tried to recall his wife’s friends. He was not the gregarious sort; he knew this. As a couple, they’d socialized little. A few neighbors, moved away long ago. A colleague at the college where he taught. But Annie had been different, collecting friendships the way other people collected frequent-flyer miles. Sometimes, he’d found himself resenting the attention she attracted. Sometimes he’d envied her. It had worn on them both.

The receipt was nothing. Debris, swept under the door during the move. But still. And there was nowhere to discard it now, no waste baskets in the empty house, no trash cans in the garage. Furtively, as if he were littering, Richard kicked the scrap under a radiator.

The house was filled with similar hiding spots, too many recesses and nooks to account for. How long had he already spent on his walk-through? It would have to be enough. Richard headed downstairs, clicking off light switches as he went. At the front door, he instinctively patted his pockets—car keys, condo keys. Check. House keys on the counter. For a moment, he wondered if he should take another look. Retrieve the receipt.

Doubt was unavoidable. But too late. The door was already locked behind him. ■

William Hall is a Portland native who has worked as a local newspaper reporter and as a PR consultant in New York City and Boston. He holds an A.B. in creative writing from Princeton University.