

SHE DIDN'T STAND A CHANCE

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A NOVEL

AUTHOR OF *SHE LEFT*

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STACIE GREY



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For Rumpole.

May your pillow always be in the sunbeam.

Fire and Ice

Some say the world will end in fire,

Some say in ice.

From what I've tasted of desire

I hold with those who favor fire.

But if it had to perish twice,

I think I know enough of hate

To say that for destruction ice

Is also great

And would suffice.

— ROBERT FROST

LETTERS FROM GERTRUDE GLASS (AGED TWELVE) TO ARNOLD GLASS

Dear Mr. Glass,

I need to ask you a favor. Carla says I'm not supposed to contact you, but I don't know who else I can ask. Andy Burnett is my stepfather and he is a photographer for the newspapers. He was working in Peru, and he got arrested for taking pictures of a protest. The man who called said they were doing everything they could to get him home, but I don't think they're trying very hard. I have tried to contact people in the government, but they don't listen to me. But I know you know a lot of people, and they might listen to you. Can you ask someone in the government to do more to find him?

Andy is a good person and we need him back.

*Sincerely,
Gertie Glass*

Dear Mr. Glass,

I am writing to thank you for helping us. I know I did not get a response from you, but when Andy got out of jail, the people said he must have very powerful friends, and I think that must have been you. I know you don't want to hear from me, and I won't bother you anymore. I don't have any way to pay you back now, so I am including an IOU you can use in the future.

*Sincerely,
Your daughter,
Gertie*

**EXCERPT FROM ARTICLE “TOP 75 MODERNIST
HOUSES IN AND AROUND PALM SPRINGS,”
DESERT STYLE MAGAZINE, SUMMER 2018**

#68 THE GLASS HOUSE

Perched on the edge of the Valley, between the Palm Springs city limits and Vista Seco State Park, there’s a window-filled house that stands on its own. Literally—the land it was built on wasn’t intended for development, and it remains unclear how it was permitted. Built by its current owner, the appropriately named retail property developer Arnold Glass, the main part of the building is enclosed on two sides by full story-height windows and is known as the Glass House, for obvious reasons. Evoking, depending on who you ask, either van der Rohe’s Barcelona Pavilion or the shopping malls that made Mr. Glass’s fortune, there’s no arguing it’s not a striking design.

The Glass House was built in 1976, a late addition to the modernist oeuvre, and the pictures of the

original styling from that era show it in every detail. Later renovations replaced the parquet floors with white marble and the shag-carpeted walls(!) with simpler plaster effects, but the central conversation pit and the “floating” plexiglass stairs leading to the central tower remain. In one concession to current trends, the five acres of grounds have recently been converted to a low-water planting scheme.

Situated behind security gates and only rarely opened by the very private Mr. Glass for press photographs (and never to the unwashed masses!), we turn to public records for the gritty details. According to the Riverside County tax assessor’s office, there are seven bedrooms and four bathrooms in the main house, plus one outbuilding with another bed and bath. No major renovation work has been done since 1992, when the shape of the pool was changed and the kitchen brought up to modern code.

The architect, Richard Gunther, was more known for his work on shopping mall design; the Glass House was his only residential project. A historic building dating to 1906 also sits on the property.

1

They saw her coming.

On either side of the front door were walls of windows, double height and interrupted only by supporting pillars. The reflected light of the morning sun made the figures inside little more than shadows to her, but Gertie would be clear to them. She knew what they would see—a slim figure with short hair, dressed in black jeans and a gray cotton blouse and carrying an oversize tote bag as a purse. What she didn't know was what they would be thinking when they saw her. Gertie composed her face into the impenetrable expression she had been practicing since she was eight and pressed the doorbell.

The door was answered by a woman in her early sixties with bobbed hair, which had been expertly dyed blond, and a linen jumpsuit in bottle green. Maryann, Gertie thought, lining her face up with the pictures she had found online.

“Gertrude,” the woman said, with a smile that was only a little forced. “We’re so glad you could make it. Please come in.”

“Thank you. And please call me ‘Gertie.’”

Coming inside from the heat of the desert was like dipping into a pool. No small feat of air-conditioning, Gertie thought, given the walls of windows and the size of the place. The room she entered was enormous, more car showroom than living space.

It was a place Gertie had been before, but not since she was three years old, and if she had been hoping for a flash of familiarity, she would have been disappointed.

But she wasn’t here to see the house. It was the people Gertie was interested in, and she didn’t recognize them either.

Aside from Maryann, there were three other people present, two men and a woman, all sitting in a conversation pit that was sunk into the middle of the room like a dry lake bed with throw rugs. They stared at her openly, sharing glances as if daring each other to speak first. Gertie decided it would have to be her, but for once in her life, she was at a loss for words.

What do you say to four siblings you don’t know?

“Sorry I’m late. Traffic was worse than I expected.”

“That’s all right,” said Maryann. “We aren’t starting until eleven. Jules wanted to make sure you had time to get settled first.”

Jules was their father’s lawyer, the only person Gertie had been in contact with since Arnold died. Or while he’d been alive, for that matter.

“You drove? But why? There’s a perfectly nice airport, and we could have sent a car.” That was Jennifer, the other woman present. She was ten years younger than Maryann and doing her best to make the most of it. Her pants were probably designer—Gertie

couldn't imagine wearing anything so ugly if they weren't—and unlike the others, she was barefoot, her chipped toenail polish looking out of place against the sleek marble floor.

“Thanks for the offer,” Gertie said, though the idea of taking a plane to travel slightly over a hundred miles was as absurd to her as if Jennifer had suggested she bunny hop the whole way. “But it’s not a long drive, and I like to have my own car. Considering the circumstances of this visit, it seems prudent.”

One of the men burst into laughter.

“Looks and talks like him! Remind me why we spent all that money on DNA tests? My God, she’s more his child than any of us.”

“Neil, honestly,” Maryann admonished, and Gertie was finally able to sort the two men into their names. The speaker was the younger brother, so the other one would be Brian, currently leaning back on the white leather sofa with a glass of brown liquor resting on his belly.

“Oh, come on, you’re all thinking it,” said Neil. He was the most relaxed of the four, lounging in an amoeba-shaped plastic chair as though it were comfortable and cracking and eating pistachios from a glass bowl on a side table. He dropped a shell on the floor and turned back to Gertie. “You have to understand, the last time we saw you, you were toddling around, and now here you are, all grown up and looking so much like the old man, I’m inclined to wonder who we’re burying.”

Brian snorted, but as he shifted forward to rest his elbows on his knees, he studied Gertie’s face. “You’ll have to excuse my brother,” he said. “Nobody ever told him he wasn’t funny.”

“I’m her brother too,” Neil retorted. “And I’ve been thinking it’s time for an upgrade on siblings.”

“Boys! Enough,” Maryann said. “There’ll be plenty of time for you both to demonstrate your personal failings later. Let’s give Gertie a minute to get her bearings.”

She picked an invisible bit of lint off the bodice of her jumpsuit and glanced up at the giant clock hands on the wall above the stairs. (They might have been pointing to five minutes to ten; it was hard to tell without any numbers.)

“Have you had breakfast?” she asked Gertie. “I’m afraid we’ve already eaten, but I’m sure Eddie could put something together for you.”

“Thanks, I had something on the way.” A double-double with grilled onions, fries well done, and a strawberry shake, eaten at the In-N-Out drive-through as soon as she was out of range of her mother’s endless calorie talk. Gertie had been blessed with a vigorous metabolism and a love of long runs, but a lifetime of fad diets had left her mother, Carla, with the ability to smell french fries on her breath, and no meal was worth another lecture on the evils of the carbohydrate.

Gertie hadn’t been exactly looking forward to this visit, but there were some upsides.

“So, what do you think of coming home?” Brian gestured at the room. “Is it just like you remember it?”

Gertie studied Brian’s face and decided he wasn’t joking.

“I’m afraid I don’t remember it at all. As you say, I was only three when we left.” Gertie had more to say about that, but the

nervous tension in the room made her cut her answers short. Gertie did have what could be called memories, but she couldn't be sure which of them were real and which had been built up by years of her mother telling her the same stories and showing her the pictures of the house every time it showed up in a magazine. So the room they were in looked familiar to her, but not in a tactile way. The only image that stood out in her mind without the glossy-paper reflection was of a chair with spindly legs against the background of a patterned carpet. In friendlier circumstances she might have mentioned it.

Instead, Gertie looked around with calm interest at the marble floor, handrail-free stairs, and open drop into the conversation pit and said, "Is this what it looked like then? It seems like it would be hard to childproof."

From the way the four siblings looked at the room and each other, it was clear this hadn't occurred to any of them.

"Well, you had a nanny, and Mrs. Phan, to look after you. I'm sure they took care of that sort of thing," Neil said uncomfortably. "I know my kids haven't had any trouble."

"Didn't Lief fall into the pool when he was two?" Jennifer asked. "It was lucky there was that guy on the staff who'd been a lifeguard."

Neil bristled. "Dad never should have let that nanny bring them in. Anyway, he was fine. Nestor had them both signed up for baby swim classes when they were eighteen months."

Gertie recognized the name—that would be Neil's husband, Nestor Zanes, who had recently been elected to the state senate.

“You said you didn’t drive far—are you living in the area now?” Maryann was back in hostess mode, which made sense, but Gertie found it disconcerting. She had thought a lot over the years about what it would be like to meet her father’s other children, but she hadn’t anticipated it being so similar to the small talk at the beginning of a job interview.

She decided to test how far that went.

“Just over in Laguna Beach. I was in Boston for law school, but since I graduated, I’ve been staying with Carla while I study for the bar. She has an apartment a few blocks from the ocean.”

Gertie didn’t expect that innocuous statement to get an equally bland response, and she was right. No one said anything, but the reactions varied between the siblings, ranging from Maryann’s pressed lips and Neil’s flaring of nostrils, to Jennifer snorting and crossing her arms and Brian draining his glass before looking deliberately out the windows. Clearly, her mother’s name still had an effect here, even after twenty-five years.

It was Jennifer who recovered first.

“Well, I suppose everyone has to live somewhere, don’t they? Did you have any luggage?” she said in a voice that was only slightly strained.

“Yes, someone met me when I arrived. He said he was taking it to the pool house?” It had been an absurd scene, the sharply dressed young man standing by with a cart to receive Gertie’s lone piece of luggage, an old duffel bag that had belonged to her stepfather.

“Yes, that’s where you’ll be, since you’re staying for the

memorial service,” Maryann said. “I think you’ll find the accommodations adequate for that much time.”

“I’m sure I will.” Gertie noticed something—amusement, maybe?—in Maryann’s tone, but she was relieved that she wasn’t going to have to be staying in the same building as these people. Before she had arrived, she had toyed with the idea that coming here might mean she would get some of her questions answered. Like why Arnold had summoned her after not seeing her for twenty-five years, or if in all that time he had ever spoken about Gertie or known anything about her life.

But the reception she had gotten so far had put that hope out of her mind. The bitterness that had characterized her parents’ divorce clearly lived on in Gertie’s half siblings, and she was no more welcome in her father’s home after his death than she had been in his lifetime.

As though he could hear her thoughts, Neil dropped another pistachio shell back into the bowl and smiled up at Gertie from his seat in the conversation pit. “Don’t take it personally,” he said. “We’ve never been big on guests around here.”

“I understand,” Gertie said absently. She was gazing at the set of floating glass stairs in the middle of the room, and the strange grouping of plants at its base.

Because there was at least one more question she didn’t know how to ask. All Gertie knew about her father’s death was that he had fallen in his home, and the police were declining to call it an accident.