

# Bernardo's House

by James Patrick Kelly

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The house was lonely. She checked her gate cams constantly, hoping that Bernardo would come back to her. She hadn't seen him in almost two years—he had never been gone this long before. Something must have happened to him. Or maybe he had just gotten tired of her. Although they had never talked about where he went when he wasn't with her, she was pretty sure she wasn't his only house. A famous doctor like Bernardo would have three houses like her. *Four*. She didn't like to think about him sleeping in someone else's bed. Which he would have been doing for *two years now*. She had been feeling dowdy recently. Could his tastes in houses have changed?

Maybe.

Probably.

Definitely.

She thought she might be too understated. Her hips were slim and her floors were pale Botticino marble. There wasn't much loft to her Epping couch cushions. Her blueprint showed a roving, size-seven dancer's body—Bernardo had specified raven hair and green eyes—and just eight simple but elegant rooms. She was a gourmet cook even though she wasn't designed to eat. Sure, back when he had first had her built he had cupped her breasts and told her that he liked them small, but maybe now what he wanted was wall-to-wall cable-knit carpet and swag drapery.

He had promised to bring her a new suite of wallscapes, which was good because there was only so much of colliding galaxies and the Sistine Chapel a girl could take. For the past nine weeks she had been cycling her walls through the sixteen million colors they could display. If she left each color up for two seconds, it would take her just under a year to review the entire palette.

Each morning for his sake she wriggled her body into one of the slinky sexwear patterns he had brought for her clothes processor. The binding bustier or the lace babydoll or the mesh camisole. She didn't much like the way the leather-and-chain teddy stuck to her skin; Bernardo had spared no expense on her tactiles. Even her couches could be aroused by the right touch. After she dressed, she polished her Amadea brass-and-chrome bathroom fixtures or her Enchantress pattern sterling silver flatware or her Cuprinox French copper cookware. Sometimes she dusted, although the reticulated polyfoam in her air handlers screened particles larger than .03 microns. She missed Bernardo so. Sometimes masturbating helped, but not much.

He had erased her memory of their last hours together—the only time he had ever made her forget. All she remembered now was that he'd said that she was finally perfect. That she must never change. He came to her, he said, to leave the world behind. To escape into her beauty. Bernardo was *so* poetic. That had been a comfort at first.

He had also locked her out of the infofeed. She couldn't get news or watch shows or play the latest sims. Or call for help. Of course, she had the entire Norton entertainment archive to keep her company, although lots of it was too adult for her. She just didn't *get* Henry James or Brenda Bop or Alain Resnais. But she liked Jane Austen and Renoir and Buster Keaton and Billie Holliday and Petchara Songsee and the 2017 Red Sox. She *loved* to read about houses. But there was nothing in her archive after 2038 and she was awake twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty five days a year.

What if Bernardo was dead? After all, he'd had the heart attack, just a couple of months before he left. Obviously, if he had died, that would be the end of her. Some new owner would wipe her memory and swap in a new body and sell all her furniture. Except Bernardo always said that she was his most precious secret. That no one else in all the world knew about her. About *them*. In which case she'd wait for him for years—*decades*—until her fuel cells were depleted and her consciousness flickered and went dark. The house started to hum some of Bernardo's favorites to push the thought away. He liked the romantics. Chopin and Mendelssohn. *Hmm-hm, hm-hm-hm-hm-hm!* “The Wedding March” from *A Midsummer's Night Dream*.

No, she wasn't bored.

Not really.

Or angry, either.

She spent her days thinking about him, not in any methodical way, but as if he had been shattered into a thousand pieces and she was trying to put him back together. She imagined this must be what dreaming was like, although, of course, she couldn't dream because she wasn't real. She was just a house. She thought of the stubble on his chin scratching her breasts and the scar on his chest and the time he laughed at something she said and the way his neck muscles corded when he was angry. She had come to realize that it was always a mistake to ask him about the outside. Always. But he enjoyed his bromeliads and his music helped him forget his troubles at the hospital, whatever they were, and he loved *her*. He was always asking her to read to him. He would sit for hours, staring up at the clouds on the ceiling, listening to her. She liked that better than sex, although having sex with him always aroused her. It was part of her design. His foreplay was gentle and teasing. He would nip at her ear with his lips, trace her eyebrows with his finger. Although he was a big man, he had a feather touch. Once he had his penis in her, though, it was more like a game than the lovemaking she had read about in books. He would tease her—stop and then go very fast. He liked blindfolds and straps and honeypins. Sometimes he'd actually roll off one side of the bed, stroll to the other and come at her again, laughing. She wondered if the real people he had sex with enjoyed being with him.

One thing that puzzled her was why he was so shy about the words. He always said vagina and anus, intercourse and fellatio. Of course, she knew all the other words; they were in the books she read when he wasn't around. Once, when he had just started to undress her, she asked if he wanted her to suck his cock. He looked as if he wanted to slap her. “Don't you ever say that to me again,” he said. “There's enough filth in the real world. It has to be different here.”

She decided that was a very romantic thing for him to say to...

And suddenly a year had passed. The house could not say where it had gone, exactly. A whole year, *misplaced*. How careless! She must do something or else it would happen again. Even though she was perfect for him, she had to make some changes. She decided to rearrange furniture.

Her concrete coffee table was too heavy for her to budge so she dragged her two elephant cushions from the playroom and tipped them against it. The ensemble formed a charming little courtyard. She pulled all

her drawers out of her dresser in her bedroom and set them sailing on her lap pool. She liked the way they bucked and bumped into one another when she turned her jets on. She had never understood why Bernardo had bought four kitchen chairs, if it was just supposed to be the two of them, but *never mind*. She overrode the defaults on her clothes processor and entered the measurements of her chairs. She made the cutest lace chemises for two of them and slipped them side-by-side in Bernardo's bed—but facing chastely away from each other. Something tingled at the edge of her consciousness, like a leaky faucet or ants in her bread drawer or...

Her motion detectors blinked. Someone had just passed her main gate. *Bernardo*.

With a thrill of horror she realized that all her lights were on. She didn't think they could be seen from outside but still, Bernardo would be furious with her. She was supposed to be his secret getaway. And what would he say when he saw her like this? The reunion she had waited for—*longed for*—would be ruined. And all because she had been weak. She had to put things right. The drawers first. One of them had become waterlogged and had sunk. Suppose she had been washing them? Yes, he might believe that. Haul the elephant cushions back into the play room. Come on, come *on*. There was no time. He'd be through the door any second. What was keeping him?

She checked her gate cams. At first she thought they had malfunctioned. She couldn't see him—or anyone. Her main gate was concealed in the cleft of what looked like an enormous boulder which Bernardo had had fabricated in Toledo, Ohio in 2037. The house panned down its length until she saw a girl taking her shirt off at the far end of the cleft.

She looked to be twelve or maybe thirteen, but still on the shy side of puberty. She was skinny and pale and dirty. Her hair was a brown tangle. She wasn't wearing a bra and didn't need one; her yellow panties were decorated with blue hippos. The girl had built a smoky fire and was trying to dry her clothes over it. She must have been caught in a rainstorm. The house never paid attention to weather but now she checked. Twenty-two degrees Celsius, wind out of the southeast at eleven kilometers per hour, humidity 69%. A muggy evening in July. The girl reached into a camo backpack, pulled out a can of beets and opened it.

The house studied her with a fierce intensity. Bernardo had told her that there were no other houses like her on the mountain and he was the only person who had ever come up her side. The girl chewed with her mouth open. She had tiny ears. Her nipples were brown as chocolate.

After a while the girl resealed the can of beets and put it away. She had eaten maybe half of it. The house did a quick calculation and decided that she had probably consumed three hundred calories. How often did she eat? Not often enough. The skin stretched taut against her ribs as the girl put her shirt on. Her pants clung to her, not quite dry. She drew a ragged, old snugsack from the pack, ballooned it and then wriggled in. It was dark now. The girl watched the fire go out for about an hour and then lay down.

It was the longest night of the house's life. She rearranged herself to her defaults and ran her diagnostics. She vacuumed her couch and washed all her floors and defrosted a chicken. She watched the girl sleep and replayed the files of when she had been awake. The house was so lonely and the poor little thing was clearly distressed.

She could help the girl.

Bernardo would be mad.

Where was Bernardo?

In the morning the girl would pack up and leave. But if the house let her go, she was not sure what would

happen next. When she thought about all those dresser drawers floating in her lap pool, her lights flickered. She wished she could remember what had happened the day Bernardo left but those files were gone.

Finally she decided. She programmed a black lace inset corset with ribbon and beading trim. Garters attached to scallop lace-top stockings. She hydrated a rasher of bacon, preheated her oven, mixed cranberry muffin batter and filled her coffee pot with French roast. She thought hard about whether she should read or watch a vid. If she were reading, she could listen to music. She printed a hardcopy of *Ozma of Oz*, but what to play? Chopin? Too dreamy. Wagner? Too scary. *Grieg*, yes. Something that would reach out and grab the girl by the tail of her grimy shirt. "In the Hall of the Mountain King" from *Peer Gynt*.

She opened herself, turned up her hall lights in welcome and waited.

Just after dawn that the girl rolled over and yawned. The house popped muffins into her oven and bacon into her microwave. She turned on her coffee pot and the Grieg. Basses and bassoons tiptoed cautiously around her living room and out her door. *Dum-dum-dum-da-dum-da-dum*. The girl started and then flew out of the snugsack faster than the house had ever seen anyone move. She crouched facing the house's open door, holding what looked like a pulse gun with the grip broken off.

"Spang me," she said. "Fucking spang me."

The house wasn't sure how to reply, so she said nothing. A mob of violins began to chase Peer Gynt around the Mountain King's Hall as the girl hesitated in the doorway. A moan of pleasure caught in the back of the house's throat. Oh, oh, *oh*—to be with a real person again! She thought of how Bernardo would rub his penis against her labia, not quite entering her. That was what it felt like to the house as the girl edged into her front hall, back against her wall. She pointed her pulse gun into the living room and then peeked around the corner. When she saw the house sitting on her couch, the girl's eyes grew as big as eggs. The house pretended to be absorbed in her book, although she was watching the girl watching her through her rover cams. The house felt *beautiful* for the first time since Bernardo left. It was all she could do to keep from hugging herself! As the Grieg ended in a paroxysm of screeching strings and thumping kettle drums, the house looked up.

"Why, hello," she said, as if surprised to see that she had a visitor. "You're just in time for breakfast."

"Don't move." The girl's face was hard.

"All right." She smiled and closed *Ozma of Oz*.

With a snarl, the girl waved the pulse gun at her Aritomo floor lamp. Blue light arced across the space and her poor Aritomo went numb. The house winced as the circuit breaker tripped. "*Ow*."

"Said don't..." The girl aimed the pulse gun at her, its batteries screaming. "...move. Who the bleeding weewaw are you?"

The house felt the tears coming; she was thrilled. "I'm the house." She had felt more in the last minute than she had in the last year. "Bernardo's house."

"Bernardo?" She called, "Bernardo, show your ass."

"He left." The house sighed. "Two ... no, *three* years ago."

"Spang if that true." She sidled into the room and brushed a finger against the dark cosmic dust filaments that laced the center of the Swan Nebula on the wallscape. "What smell buzzy good?"

"I told you." The house reset the breaker but her Aritomo stayed dark. "Breakfast."

"Bernardo's breakfast?"

"Yours."

"My?" The girl filled the room with her twitchy energy.

"You're the only one here."

"Why you dressed like cheap meat?"

The house felt a stab of doubt. Cheap? She was wearing *black lace*, from the *de Chaumont* collection! She rested a hand at her décolletage. "This is the way Bernardo wants me."

"You a fool." The girl picked up the 18th century Zuni water jar from the Nottingham highboy, shook it and then sniffed the lip. "Show me that breakfast."

Six cranberry muffins.

A quarter kilo of bacon.

Three cups of scrambled ovos.

The girl washed it all down with a tall glass of gel Ojay and a pot of coffee. She seemed to relax as she ate, although she kept the pulse gun on the table next to her and she didn't say a word to the house. The house felt as if the girl was judging her. She was confused and a little frightened to see herself through the girl's eyes. Could pleasing Bernardo really be foolish? Finally she asked if she might be excused. The girl grunted and waved her off.

The house rushed to the bedroom, wriggled out of the corset and crammed it into the recycling slot of the clothes processor. She scanned all eight hundred pages of the wardrobe menu before fabricating a stretch navy-blue jumpsuit. It was cut to the waist in the back and was held together by a web of spaghetti straps but she covered up with a periwinkle jacquard kimono with the collar flipped. She turned around and around in front of the mirror, so amazed that she could barely find herself. She looked like a nun. The only skin showing was on her face and hands. Let the girl stare now!

The girl had pushed back from the table but had not yet gotten up. She had a thoughtful but pleased look, as if taking an inventory of everything she had eaten.

"Can I bring you anything else?" said the house.

The girl glanced up at her and frowned. "Why you change clothes? Cause of me?"

"I was cold."

"You was naked. You know what happens to naked?" She made a fist with her right hand and punched the palm of her left. "Bin-bin-bin-*bam*. They take you, whether you say yes or no. Not fun."

The house thought she understood, but wished she didn't. "I'm sorry."

"You be sweat sorry, sure." The girl laughed. "What your name?"

"I told you. I'm Bernardo's house."

“Spang that. You Louise.”

“Louise?” The house blinked. “Why Louise?”

“Not know Louise's story?” The girl clearly found this a failing on the house's part. “Most buzzy.” She tapped her forefinger to the house's nose. “Louise.” Then the girl touched her own nose. “Fly.”

For a moment, the house was confused. “That's not a girl's name.”

“Sure, not girl, not boy. Fly is *Fly*.” She tucked the pulse gun into the waistband of her pants. “Nobody wants Fly, but then nobody catches Fly.” She stood. “Buzzy-buzz. Now we find Bernardo.”

“But...”

But what was the point? Let the girl—Fly—see for herself that Bernardo wasn't home. Besides the house longed to be looked at. Admired. Used. In Bernardo's room, Fly stretched out under the canopy of the Ergotech bed and gazed up at the moonlit clouds drifting across the underside of the valence. She clambered up the Gecko climbing wall in the gym and picked strawberries in the greenhouse. She seemed particularly impressed by the Piero scent palette, which she discovered when the house filled her jacuzzi with jasmine water. She had the house—Louise—give each room a unique smell. Bernardo had had a very low tolerance for scent; he said there were too many smells at the hospital. He even made the house vent away the aromas of her cooking. Once in a while he might ask for a whiff of campfire smoke or the nose of an old Côtes de Bordeaux, but he would never mix scents across rooms. Fly had Louise breathe roses into the living room and seashore into the gym and onions frying in the kitchen. The onion smell made her hungry again so she ate half of the chicken that Louise had roasted for her.

Fly spent the afternoon in the playroom, browsing Louise's entertainment archive. She watched a Daffy Duck cartoon and a Harold Lloyd silent called *Girl Shy* and the rain delay episode from *Jesus on First*. She seemed to prefer comedy and happy endings and had no use for ballet or Westerns or rap. She balked at wearing spex or strapping on an airflex, so she skipped the sims. Although she had never learned to read, she told Louise that a woman named Kuniko used to read her fairy tales. Fly asked if Louise knew any and she hardcopied *Grimm's Household Tales* in the 1884 translation by Margaret Hunt and read Little Briar-Rose.

Which was one of Bernardo's favorite fairy tales. Mostly he liked his fiction to be about history. Sailors and cowboys and kings. War and politics. He had no use for mysteries or love stories or science fiction. But every so often he would have her read a fairy tale and then he would try to explain it. He said fairy tales could have many meanings, but she usually just got the one. She remembered that the time she had read Briar Rose to him, he was working at his desk, the only intelligent system inside the house that she couldn't access. He was working in the dark and the desk screen cast milky shadows across his face. She was pretty sure he wasn't listening to her. She wanted to spy over his shoulder with one of her rover cams to see what was so interesting.

“And, in the very moment when she felt the prick,” she read, “she fell down upon the bed that stood there, and lay in a deep sleep.”

Bernardo chuckled.

Must be something he saw on the desk, she thought. Nothing funny about Briar Rose. “And this sleep extended over the whole palace; the King and Queen who had just come home, and had entered the great hall, began to go to sleep, and the whole of the court with them. The horses, too, went to sleep in the stable, the dogs in the yard, the pigeons upon the roof, the flies on the wall; even the fire that was flaming on the hearth became quiet and slept. And the wind fell, and on the trees before the castle not a

leaf moved again. But round about the castle there began to grow a hedge of thorns, which every year became higher, and at last grew close up round the castle and all over it, so that there was nothing of it to be seen, not even the flag upon the roof."

"Pay attention," said Bernardo.

"Me?" said the house.

"You." Bernardo tapped the desk screen and it went dark. She brought the study lights up.

"That will happen one of these days," he said.

"What?"

"I'll be gone and you'll fall fast asleep."

"Don't say things like that, Bernardo."

He crooked a finger and she slid her body next to him.

"You're hopeless," he said. "That's what I love about you." He leaned into her kiss.

"And then the marriage of the King's son with Briar-rose was celebrated with all splendor," the house read, "and they lived contented to the end of their days."

"Heard it different," said Fly "With nother name, not Briar Rose." She yawned and stretched. "Heard it *Betty*."

"Betty Rose?"

"Plain Betty."

The house was eager to please. "Would you like another? Or we could see an opera. I have over six hundred interactive games that you don't need to suit up for. Poetry? The Smithsonian? Superbowls I-LXXVIII?"

"No more jabber. Boring now." Fly peeled herself from the warm embrace of the Kukurū chair and stretched. "Still hiding somewhere."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Fly caught the house's body by the arm and dragged her through herself, calling out the names of her rooms. "Play. Living. Dining. Kitchen. Study. Gym. Bed. Nother bed. Plants." Fly spun Louise in the front hall and pointed. "Door?"

"Right." The house was out of breath. "Door. You've seen all there is to see."

"One door?" The girl's smile was as agreeable as a fist. "Fly buzzy with food now, but not stupid. Where you keep stuff? Heat? Electric? Water?"

"You want to see *that*?"

Fly let go of Louise's arm. "Dink yeah."

The house didn't much care for her basement and she never went down unless she had to. It was *ugly*. Three harsh rows of ceiling lights, a couple of bilious green pumps, the squat power plant and the circuit

breakers and all that multiconductor cable! She didn't like listening to her freezer hum or smelling the naked cement walls or looking at the scars where the forms had been stripped away after her foundation had been poured.

"Bernardo?" Fly's voice echoed across the expanse of the basement. "Cut that weewaw, Bernardo."

"Believe me, there's nothing here." The house waited on the stairs as the girl poked around. "Please don't touch any switches," she called.

"Where that go?" Fly pointed at the heavy duty, ribbed, sectional overhead door.

"A tunnel," said the house, embarrassed by the rawness of her 16 gauge steel. "It comes out farther down the mountain near the road. At the end there's another door that's been shotcreted to look like stone."

"What scaring Bernardo?"

Bernardo scared? The thought had never even occurred to the house. Bernardo was not the kind of man who would be scared of anything. All he wanted was privacy so he could be alone with her. "I don't know," she said.

Fly was moving boxes stacked against the wall near the door. Several contained bolts of spuncloth for the clothes processor, others were filled with spare lights, fertilizer, flour, sugar, oil, raw vitabulk, vials of flavor and food coloring. Then she came to the wine, a couple of hundred bottles of vintage Bordeaux and Napa and Maipo River, some thrown haphazardly into old boxes, other stacked near the wall.

"Bernardo drink most wine," said Fly.

Louise was confused by this strange cache but before she could defend Bernardo, Fly found the second door behind two crates of toilet paper.

"Where *that* go?"

The house felt as if the entire mountain were pressing down on her roof. The door had four panels, two long on top and two short on the bottom and looked to be made of oak, although that didn't mean anything. She fought the crushing weight of the stone with all her might. She thought she could hear her bearing walls buckle, her mind crack. She zoomed her cams on the bronze handleset. Someone would need a key to open that door. But there were no keys! And just who would that someone be?

The house had never seen the door before.

Fly jiggled the handleset, but the door was locked. "Bernardo." She put her face to the door and called. "Hey you."

The house ran a check of her architectural drawings, although she knew what she would find. The girl turned to her and waved the house over. "Louise, how you open this weewaw?"

Her plans showed no door.

The girl rapped on the door.

The house's thoughts turned to stone.

When she woke up, her body was on her Epping couch. The jacquard kimono was open and the spaghetti straps that drew her jumpsuit tight were undone. The house had never woken up before. Oh,



she had lost that year, but still she had blurry memories of puttering around the kitchen and vacuuming and lazing in her Kukurū chair reading romances and porn. But this was the first time she had ever been nothing and nowhere since the day Bernardo had turned her on.

“You okay?” Fly knelt by her and rested a hand lightly on the house's forehead to see if she were running a fever. The house melted under the girl's touch. She reached up and guided Fly's hand slowly down the side of her face to her lips. When Fly did not resist, Louise kissed the girl's fingers.

“How old are you?” said Louise.

“Thirteen.” Fly gazed down on her, concern tangling with suspicion.

“Two years older than I am.” Louise chuckled. “I could be your little sister.”

“You dropped, bin-bam and *down*.” The girl's voice was thick. “Scared me. Lights go out and nothing work.” Fly pulled her hand back. “Thought maybe you dead. And me locked in.”

“Was I out long?”

“Dink yeah. Felt like most a day.”

“Sorry. That's never happened before.”

“You said, touch no switch. So door is switch?”

At the mention of the *door*, *there was no door, look at the door, no door there*, the house's vision started to dim and the room grew dark. “I—I...”

The girl put her hands on the house's shoulder and shook her. “Louise what? *Louise*.”

The house felt circuit breakers snap. She writhed with the pain and bit down hard on her lip. “*No*,” she cried and sat up, arms flailing. “*Yes*.” It came out as a hiss and then she was blinking against the brightness of reality.

Fly was pointing the pulse gun at Louise but her hand was not steady. She had probably figured out that zapping the house wouldn't help at all. A shut-down meant a lock-down and the girl had already spent one day in the dark. Louise raised a hand to reassure her and tried to cover her own panic with a smile. It was a tight fit. “I'm better now.”

“Better.” Fly tucked the gun away. “Not good?”

“Not good, no,” said the house. “I don't know what's wrong with me.”

The girl paced around the couch. “Listen,” she said finally. “Front door, *front*. Door I came in, okay? Open that weewaw.”

The house nodded. “I can do that.” She felt stuffy and turned her air recirculators up. “But I can't leave it open. I'm not allowed. So if you want to go, maybe you should go now.”

“Go? Go where?” The girl laughed bitterly. “Here is buzzy. World is spang.”

“Then you should stay. I very much want you to stay. I'll feed you, tell you stories. You can take a bath and play in the gym and watch vids and I can make you new clothes, whatever you want. I need someone to take care of. It's what I was made for.” As Louise got off the couch, the living room seemed to tilt but then immediately righted itself. The lights in the gym and the study clicked back on. “There are

just some things that we can't talk about."

Days went by.

Then weeks.

Soon it was months.

After bouncing off each other at first, the house and the girl settled into a routine of eating and sleeping and playing the hours away—mostly together. Louise could not decide what about Fly pleased her the most. Certainly she enjoyed cooking for the girl, who ate an amazing amount for someone her size. Bernardo was a picky eater. At his age, he had to watch his diet and there were some things he would never have touched, even before the heart attack, like cheese and fish and garlic. After a month of devouring three meals and two snacks a day, the girl was filling out nicely. The chickens were gone, but Fly loved synthetics. Louise could no longer count the girl's ribs. And she thought the girl's breasts were starting to swell.

Louise had only visited the gym to dust before the girl arrived. Now the two of them took turns on the climbing wall and the gyro and the trampoline, laughing and urging each other to try new tricks. Fly couldn't swim so she never used the lap pool but she loved the jacuzzi. The first few times she had dunked with all her clothes on. Finally Louise hit upon a strategy to coax her into a demure bandeau bathing suit. She imported pictures of hippos from her archive to the clothes processor to decorate the suit. After that, all the pajamas and panties and bathing suits that Fly fabricated had hippo motifs.

The house was tickled by the way Fly became a clothes processor convert. At first she flipped through the house's wardrobe menus without much interest. The jumpsuits were all too tight and she had no patience whatsoever for skirts or dresses. The rest of it was either too stretchy, too skimpy, too short or too thin. "Good for weewaw," she said, preferring to wear the ratty shirt and pants and jacket that she had arrived in. But Fly was thrilled with the shoes. She never seemed to tire of designing sandals and slingbacks and mules and flats and jammers. She was particularly proud of her Cuthbertsons, a half boot with an oblique toe and a narrow last. She made herself pairs in aqua and mauve and faux snakeskin.

It was while Fly was exploring shoe menus that she clicked from a page of women's loafers to a page of men's, and so stumbled upon Bernardo's clothing menus. Louise heard a cackle of delight and hurried to the bedroom to see what was happening. Fly was dancing in front of the screen. "Really real pants," she said, pointing. "Real pants don't fall open bin-bin-bam." She started wearing jeans and digbys and fleece and sweatshirts with hoods and pullovers. One day she emerged from the bedroom in an olive-check silk sportcoat and matching driving cap. Seeing Fly in men's clothes made the house feel self-conscious about her own wardrobe of sexware. Soon she too was choosing patterns from Bernardo's menus. The feel of a chamois shirt against her skin reminded the house of her lost love. Once, in a guilty moment, she wondered what he might think if he walked in on them. But then Fly asked Louise to read her a story and she put Bernardo out of mind.

Although they spent many hours sampling vids together, Louise was happiest reading to Fly. They would curl up together in the Kuku and the girl would turn the pages as the house read. Of course, they started with hippos: *Hugo the Hippo* and *Hungo the Hippo* and *The Hippo Had Hiccups*. Then *There's a Hippopotamus Under My Bed* and *Hip, Hippo, Hooray* and all of the Peter Potamus series. Sometimes Fly would play with Louise's hair while she read, braiding and unbraiding it, or else she would absently press Louise's fingernails like they were keys on a keyboard. One night, just two months after she'd come to the house, the girl fell asleep while the house was reading her *Chocolate Chip Hippo*. It was as close to orgasm as the house had been since she had been with Bernardo. She was tempted to kiss the girl but settled for spending the night with her arms around her. The hours ticked slowly as the

house gazed down at Fly's peaceful face. She watched the girl's eyes move beneath her lids as she dreamed.

The house wished she could sleep.

If only she could dream.

What was it like to be real?

Bernardo was never himself again after the heart attack. Of course, he said he was fine. *Fine*. He probably wouldn't even have told her except for the sternotomy scar, an angry purple-red pucker on his chest. When he first came back to her, five weeks after his triple bypass operation, she could tell he was struggling. It was partly the sex. Normally he would have taken her to bed for the entire first day. Although he kissed her neck and caressed her breasts and told her he loved her, it was almost a week before she coaxed him into sex. She was wild to have his penis in her vagina, to taste his ejaculation; that was how he'd had her designed. But their lovemaking wasn't the same. Sometimes his breath caught during foreplay, as if someone were sitting on him. So she did most of the squirming and licking and sucking. Not that she minded. He watched her—mouth set, toes curled. He could stay just as erect as before, but she knew he was taking pills for that. Once when she was guiding him into her, he gave a little grunt of pain.

“Are you all right?” she said.

He gave no answer but instead pushed deep all at once; she shivered with delight. But as he thrust at her, she realized that he was *working*, not playing. They weren't sharing pleasure; he was *giving* it and she was *taking* it. Afterwards, he fell asleep almost immediately. No kisses, no cuddles. No stories. The house was left alone with her thoughts. Bernardo had changed, yes. He *could* change, and she must always be the same. That was the difference between being a real person and being a house.

He spent more time in the greenhouse than in bed, rearranging his bromeliads. His favorites were the tank types, the *Neoregelias* with their gaudy leaves and the *Aechmeas* with their alien inflorescences. He liked to pot them in tableaux: Washington Crossing The Delaware, The Last Supper. Bernardo preferred to be alone with his plants, and she pretended to honor his wish, although her rover cam lurked behind the *Schefflera*. So she saw him slump against the potting bench on that last day. She thought he was having another attack.

“Bernardo!” she cried over the room speaker as she sent her body careening toward the greenhouse.

“My god, Bernardo. What is it?”

When she got to him, she could see that his shoulders were shaking. She leaned him back. His eyes were shiny. “Bernardo?” She touched a tear that ran down his face.

“When I had you built,” he said, “all I wanted was to be the person who deserved to live here. But I'm not anymore. Maybe I never was.” His eyelid drooped and the corner of his mouth curved in an odd frown.

“Louise, wake up!” Someone was shaking her.

The house opened her eyes and powered up all her cams at once. “What?” The first thing she saw was Fly staring up at her, clearly worried.

“You sleeptalking.” The girl took the house's hand in both of hers. “Saying ‘Bernardo, Bernardo.’ Real sad.”

"I don't sleep."

"Spang you don't. What you just doing?"

"I ... I was thinking."

"About him?"

"Let's have breakfast."

"What happened to him?" said Fly. "Where *is* Bernardo?"

The house had to change the topic somehow. In desperation she filled the room with bread scent and put on the Wagner's *Prelude to Die Meistersinger*. It was sort of a march. Actually, more a processional. Anyway, they needed to move. Or *she* did. *La-lum-la-la, li-li-li-li-la-la-lum-la.*

Let's talk about you, Fly.

No, really.

But why not?

At first, Fly had refused to say anything about her past, but she couldn't help but let bits of the story slip. As time passed and she felt more secure, she would submit to an occasional question. The house was patient and never pressed the girl to say more than she wanted. So it took time for the house to piece together Fly's story.

Sometime around 2038, as near as the house could tell, a computer virus choked off the infofeed for almost a month. The virus apparently repurposed much of the Midwest's computing resources to perform a single task. Fly remembered a time when every screen she saw was locked on its message: *Bang, you're dead*. Speakers blared it, phones rasped it, thinkmates whispered it into earstones. *Bang, you're dead*. Fly was still living in the brown house with white shutters in Sarcoxie with her mother, whose name was Nikki, and her father, Jerry, who had a tattoo of a hippo on each arm. Her father had worked as a mechanic for Sarcoxie RentalCars 'N More. But although the screens came back on, Sarcoxie RentalCars 'N More never reopened. Her father said that there was no work anywhere in the Ozarks. They lived in the brown house for awhile but then there was no food so they had to leave. She remembered that they got on a school bus and lived in a big building where people slept on the floor and there were always lines for food and the bathrooms smelled a bad kind of sweet and then they sent her family to tents in the country. They must have been staying near a farm because she remembered chickens and sometimes they had scrambled eggs for dinner but then there was a fire and people were shooting bullets and she got separated from her parents and nobody would tell her where they were and then she was with Kuniko, an old woman who lived in a dead Dodge Caravan and next to it was another car she had filled with cans of fried onions and chow mein and creamed corn and Kuniko was the one who told her the fairy tales but that winter it got very cold and Kuniko died and Happy Man took her away. He did things to her she was never going to talk about although he did give her good stuff to eat. Happy Man said people were working again and the infofeed had grown much wider and things were getting back to normal. Fly thought that meant her father would come to rescue her but finally she couldn't wait any more so she zapped Happy Man with his pulse gun and took some of his stuff and ran and ran and ran until Louise had let her in.

Hearing the girl's story helped the house understand some things about Bernardo. He must have left her just after the *Bang, you're dead* virus had first struck. He had turned off the infofeed so she wouldn't be infected. How brave of him to go back to the chaos of the world in his condition! He would save lives at

the hospital, no doubt about that. She ought to be proud of him. Only why hadn't he come back, now that things were better? Had she done something to drive him away for good? And why couldn't she remember him leaving? Slipping reluctantly out the front door, turning for one last smile.

It was several days after Fly had fallen asleep in Louise's lap that they had their first fight. It was over Bernardo. Or rather his things. The house had tried to respect the privacy of Bernardo's study. Although she read some of his files over his shoulder, she had never thought to break the encryption on his desktop. And while she had been through most of his desk drawers, there was one that was locked that she had never tried to open.

Louise was in her kitchen, making lunch, but she was also following Fly with one of her rover cams. The girl had wandered into the study. The house was astonished to see her lift his diploma from Dartmouth Medical School and look at the wall behind it. She did the same to the picture of Bernardo shaking hands with the Secretary-General, then she plopped into his desk chair. She opened the trophy case and handled Bernardo's swimming medals from Duke. She picked up the Lasker trophy, which he won for research into the role of DNA methylation in endometrial cancer. It was a small golden winged victory perched on a teak base. She rolled around the room in the chair, waving it and making crow sounds. *Caw-caw-caw*. Then she put the Lasker down again—in the wrong place! In the top drawer of Bernardo's desk was the Waltham pocket watch his grandfather had left him. She shook it and listened for ticking. His Myaki thinkmate was in the bottom drawer. She popped the earstone in and said something to the CPU but quickly seemed to lose interest in its reply. Louise wanted to rush into the study to stop this violation, but was paralyzed by her own shocked fascination. The girl was a real person and could obviously do things that the house would never think of doing.

Nevertheless, Louise disapproved at lunch. "I don't like you going through Bernardo's desk. That's weewaw."

Fly almost choked on her cream cheese and jelly sandwich. "What you just said?"

"I don't like..."

"You said weewaw. Why you talking spang mouth like Fly?"

"I like the way you talk. It's buzzy."

"Fly talks like Fly." She pushed her plate away. "Louise must talk like house." She pointed a finger at Louise. "You spying me now?"

"I saw you in the study, yes."

Fly leaned across the table. "You spy Bernardo the same?"

"No," she lied, "Of course not."

"Slack him, not me?"

"I'm Bernardo's house, Fly. I told you that the first day."

"You Louise now." She came around the table and tugged at the house's chair. "Come." She steered her to the front hall. "Open door."

"Why?"

"We go out now. Look up sky."

"No, Fly, you don't understand."

"Most understand." She put a hand on the house's shoulder. "Buzzy outside, Louise." Fly smiled. "Come on."

It made the house woozy to leave herself, as if she were in two places at once. Bernardo had brought her outside just the once. He seemed relieved that she didn't like it. She had forgotten that outside was so *big*! So *bright*! There was so much *air*! She shielded her eyes with her hand and turned her gate cams up to their highest resolution.

Fly settled on a long, flat rock, one of the weathered bones of the mountain. She tucked her legs beneath her. "Now comes Louise's story." She pointed at the rock next to her. "Fairy tale Louise."

Louise sat. "All right."

"Once on time," said the girl, "Louise lives in that castle. Louise's Mom dies, don't say where her Dad goes. So Louise stuck with spang bitch taking care of her. That Louise castle got no door, only windows high and high. Now Louise got most hair." Fly spread her arms wide. "Hair big as trees. When spang bitch want in, she call Louise. '*Louise, Louise, let down buzzy hair.*' Then spang bitch climb it up."

"Rapunzel," said the house. "Her name was Rapunzel."

"Is *Louise* now." The girl shook her head emphatically. "You know it then? Prince comes and tells Louise run away from spang bitch and they live buzzy always after?"

"You brought me outside to tell me a fairy tale?"

"Dink no." Fly reached into the pocket of her flannel shirt. "Cause of you go fainting, we both safe here outside."

"Who said anything about fainting?"

The girl brought something out of her pocket in a closed fist. The house felt a chill, but there was no way to adjust the temperature of the entire *world*.

"Fly, what?"

She held the fist out to Louise. "Door in basement, you know?" She opened it to reveal a key. "Spang door? It opens."

The house immediately started all her rover cams for the basement. "Where did you find that?"

"In Bernardo's desk."

The house could hear the tick of nanoseconds as the closest cam crawled maddeningly down the stairs. Maybe real people could open doors like that, but not Louise. It seemed like an eternity before she could speak. "And?"

"You thinking Bernardo dead down there," said the girl. "Locked in behind that door where all that wine should be."

For the first time she realized that the world was making noises. The wind whispered in the leaves and some creature was going *chit-chit-chit* and she wasn't sure whether it was a bird or a grasshopper and she didn't really care because at that moment the rover cam turned and saw the door....

“But you closed it again.” The house shivered. “Why? What did you see?”

Fly stared at Louise. “Nothing.”

The house knew it was a lie. “Tell me.”

“No fucking thing.” Fly closed her fist around the key again. “Bernardo been *your* spang bitch. So now run away from him.” She came over to Louise and hugged her. “Live buzzy after always with me.”

“I’m a house,” said Louise. “How can I run away?”

“Not run away there.” The girl gestured dismissively at the woods. “World is spang.” She stood on tiptoes and rested a finger between Louise’s eyes. “Run away here.” She nodded. “In your head.”

She brought his dinner to the study, although she didn’t know why exactly. He hadn’t moved. Mist rose off the lake on his wallscape; the Alps surrounding it glowed in the serene waters. Chopin’s *Adieu Etude* filled the room with its sublime melancholy. It had been playing over and over again since she had first come upon him. She couldn’t bring herself to turn it off.

He had left a book of new poems, Ho Peng Kee’s *The Edge of the Sky*, face down on the desk. She moved it now and put the ragout in its place. In front of him. Earlier she had taken the key from his desk and brought a bottle of the ‘28 Haut-Brion up from the wine closet in the basement. It had been breathing for twenty minutes.

“You took such good care of me,” she said.

With a flourish, she lifted the cover from the ragout but he didn’t look. His head was back. His empty eyes were fixed on the ceiling. She couldn’t believe how, even now, his presence filled the room. Filled her completely.

“I don’t know how to live without you, Bernardo,” she said. “Why didn’t you shut me off? I’m not real; I don’t want to have these feelings. I’m just a house.”

“Louise!”

The house was dreaming over the makings of spinach lasagna in the kitchen.

“Louise.” Fly called again from the playroom. “Come read me that buzzy book again. *Hip, Hip, Hip Hippopotamus.*”

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