

Managing Helen

by Marta Randall

The children clatter up the steps and across the back stoop to the screen door. Between them they clutch a brown paper grocery bag. The older, a girl, reaches up for the metal handle.

"Max! Hilary! Hold the door for me, please." But by the time Miri rounds the corner of the house they are already inside, their voices fading toward their grandmother's bedroom.

Miri frees an index finger to hook through the handle and pull the screen door open. She pauses for a moment, shifting the bags in her arms, and looks across the back yard. Gladiolus grow along the garage wall, red and gold against the cream stucco. Lilies and a hedge of pink roses bloom under the apple tree, edging a neat square of trimmed grass. Alejandro must be doing a good job.

She frowns, the groceries heavy in her arms. No, Alejandro worked here last spring, followed by Ramon, followed by Benito. Miri and her husband pay for the gardeners, but Helen fires them; five since last Thanksgiving. Her tote bag pulls at her shoulder. She sighs and goes into her mother's kitchen.

"My babies!" Her mother's voice, from the bedroom. The children stop arguing about cartoons as their grandmother exclaims over them. The kitchen is clean and neat, appliances gleaming as though never used, the smell of disinfectant still lingering from the house-cleaner's visit yesterday. The children have left the bag on a chair. Miri puts her own bags on the scrubbed wooden table. She pulls out a bottle of wine and puts it in the refrigerator, moving aside bowls and plates of leftovers. She will have to throw most of them out, before her mother gives herself food poisoning. As she opens the second wine bottle the voices in the bedroom become murmurs – her mother is asking about the children's father, Theo. She always drops her voice when she does that. Hilary's clear voice says, "Mom says he'll be home when we wake up tomorrow." She is seven. Max, who is four, chants "Fa-ther! Fa-ther! Fa-ther!" The television clicks on.

Miri lines ingredients along one side of the table: onions crackling in their yellow skins, the bag of peas, a jar of home-made chicken broth, green herbs, flour. She

