

SURREAL ESTATE

By Nina Kiriki Hoffman

Wendy Renault was almost forty, and she had been living in apartments ever since she moved away from her parents at age nineteen. With her husband's life insurance money, she finally had a chance to buy a dream.

Her dream home. A place where she could build her dream life, with her dream companion.

But real-life details kept getting in the way.

"Okay," said the whole house inspector, kneeling beside the house. He chewed tobacco with his mouth open, and squinted up at her. Late afternoon sun shimmered in the beaded perspiration on his forehead. "This ain't a big thing, but you're gonna wanta put some caulking in around that hole drilled through the siding. Don't give pests any avenue into your structure here."

Wendy scribbled on her steno pad, under the notes she had made about the v-shaped cracks in the foundation, the standing water under the house, and the untempered glass in the window next to the front door. She scratched at the sunburn she'd gotten the day before while strolling around the neighborhood to see if she might like living here, even though she and Malcolm had already pretty much fixed on this house. After closing her eyes for a second, she glanced anxiously at the siding. Inside she was wearing a big frown, though her face smiled. How many more pinholes could this guy punch in her dream? All the helium was escaping.

"See where the mulch is mounded up here above the foundation line? An open invitation to pests," said the inspector. He spat, spraying nicotine on a weed. "You had the termite guys in here yet?"

She shook her head, dreading it.

"Tell 'em to check over here. Now, I'm not an expert on that stuff, I don't check for it. You might have your dampwood termites or worse, your subterranean termites, or your fungi, carpenter ants, wood-boring beetles...house could be riddled."

She wished he wouldn't characterize all these pests as hers.

"Another thing," he said, dusting off the knees of his pants as he rose.

Wendy groaned inside. Then she wondered what these groans would do, bouncing around inside her with no outlet. Build up ricochet momentum and punch a hole in her?

"You got your ghost turds. Mostly inside." He patted the wall.

"What on earth is a ghost turd?"

"Evidence," he said. "Eck-toe-plas-mick evidence."

“What?” asked Wendy, slightly panicked, keeping that inside too.

“They’re hard to examine, being kinda slippery,” he said. “I did not discover if they was fresh or if the old lady is not much of a housekeeper and they’ve been around a while. But you got your ghost turds in a couple corners. Now I have not hit on a surefire method for exterminating ghosts. If there’s much trouble, though, you give me a call. I got a couple guys I can refer you to.”

“Trouble?” said Wendy. She licked her upper lip.

“Now some ghosts will respect your privacy and only haunt and such when you’re out of the house, but others will make a nuisance of themselves, and you don’t want that. Let me know how it goes. Here’s my card. Call me if you have any questions.”

“But—” she said.

He smiled, spat some more juice, and nailed a dandelion. “I’ll get that report to you by Friday, barring accidents. You want any of this work done, I can recommend independent contractors to you. Only if you want me to.”

“Thanks,” she said, still smiling, and shook hands with him. She didn’t wipe her hand off on her jeans until he had driven away in his truck.

Malcolm was waiting in the hotel room for her, since she had left the locket there. It was so much easier for her to deal with real-life situations without him there to distract her that she had done it deliberately.

She could tell he was going to kvetch. She sighed.

He changed his mind. “So what happened?”

“Fifteen more things wrong. Look at this list. You really, really want that place?”

He looked surprised. “I thought you did.”

“Yesterday I did,” she said, “enough to overlook that red plaid rug and those terrible fifties light fixtures. But today... what with the foundation cracks and the standing water and the pest super-highways....”

Malcolm flickered a little, the way he did when he was feeling uncertain. “Wendy, the psychic climate in the house....”

“Oh, yeah. That’s another thing. He says there’s a ghost there already.”

“What?” He solidified and stared at her.

“Apparently ghosts leave debris the way termites do,” she said, and grinned. After a moment she lost her grin. She looked around the floor, wondering if Malcolm had left any signs; but the carpet looked fairly clean except for a few cigarette burns near the bed.

“I wish I had been there,” he said wistfully.

Of all his tactics, she hated wistful the most. He had never been wistful when he was alive, but it was something his mother had done quite well. The fact that he had adopted it since dying made her wonder what other unpleasant surprises might be in store in their relationship's future.

“Shut up about it,” she said.

“Wendy!”

“When you get the what-might-have-beens, you drive me crazy!”

“When you get rude, you drive me—“ he began, then appeared to think better of it.

“You want to spend the night in the car, parked someplace else?”

He faded away, then reappeared, looking extra-solid. He frowned at her. “No. I hate it when you threaten me! That’s no way to run a relationship.”

She was already cringing inside, because she knew he was right, but she didn’t feel like apologizing. “Let’s go to bed,” she said gruffly.

“I don’t think we should let the sun set on this. Besides, you haven’t had any dinner.”

“Quit being such a mommy.” Her stomach was starting to relax as the tension drained out of her. Sometimes her moods would shift without her understanding why. Only since he died. Before he died, they could have kept the argument going all night, orchestrating dynamics from piano to fortissimo and back.

“You have to eat.” He shook his finger at her, looking stern, then put his hands behind his back.

“Oh, yeah, rub my nose in it,” she said, but she could feel the laughter bubbling up, inexplicably. “What are you doing?”

“What could I be doing?” He gave her his heavenly angel smile, his hands still hidden.

Her stomach growled and they both stared at it.

“What did I tell you?” he asked.

“Okay, okay.” She got the locket out of the secret compartment in her suitcase (it made him really nervous when she left it there—what if, he asked her, someone stole her luggage? Where would he be?) and fastened the chain around her neck, and they left together.

She got drive-through tacos. When he was with her, she ate in the car. Too many times they had started heated discussions in restaurants, and people had gotten upset with her for shouting at air.

“Let’s go to the house,” he said.

“Goofus! The little old lady still lives there. What’s she going to think if she sees a car lurking out in front of the house? She’ll call the police.”

“Park down the block. I want to investigate.”

“Suddenly you’re a detective?”

“Why not?”

She shrugged, drove to the neighborhood where she might or might not live, depending, where Malcolm might or might not reside, depending, and parked half a block away from the house they had picked. The house was small and khaki green and had a “Sale Pending” sign in the kitchen window.

“I do,” Malcolm said, apropos of nothing. “I like this neighborhood. I know it seems like a suburban nightmare, just the kind of thing we sneered at in the sixties, but....”

“Yeah, we’re older now,” said Wendy. “At least, some of us are.” She slathered hot sauce on her soft flour taco and took a bite that dribbled taco juice down her chin.

“My perspective has changed, or mellowed, or something. Hold the fort.” He slid out through the door and strolled up the sidewalk toward the house.

Wendy wiped her chin with a napkin and watched him. He paused in front of the house and glanced back at her, then walked up the path to the front door and vanished.

She hoped this wasn’t one of those times when he got visible. Every once in a while there was some sort of slip-up—or maybe it was supposed to happen; she and Malcolm weren’t sure of the rules yet—where other people could see him. Sometimes, everybody else; sometimes only one other person.

Wendy didn’t know whether the house’s owner would be susceptible. When she and Malcolm had gone through the house with the realtor, whom they had already established as Malcolm-oblivious, the little old lady had been out somewhere. This afternoon during the whole house inspection Wendy had finally met the owner, but Malcolm had been at the hotel.

While they were driving away after their first visit to the house, the realtor explained that the owner hadn’t wanted to part with the place, but her husband had died fairly recently and it was just too much for her to keep up alone, so she was moving to a retirement community. Wendy didn’t say anything about her husband having died recently too. That wasn’t the level she liked to relate to people on. It clarified for her the difference between generations, though: obviously this older woman had depended on her husband to take care of all kinds of things she didn’t want to handle herself, whereas Wendy had tuned the car, Wendy had kept the checkbook, Malcolm had done the cooking—while he was alive. They were still trying to work out rules of matter manipulation to see if he could handle cooking now, but so far their experiments hadn’t uncovered laws that would let him. He could move some things, but the ability came and went.

If she had lost Malcolm completely, would she have had the strength to go out and buy a house, start a new phase in life? She wasn't sure. Some small part of her told her she might have locked herself up in the apartment with all the curtains closed, living on cheese and crackers and letting her awareness decay.

It wasn't a side of herself she wanted to recognize. Good that it hadn't come to that.

When she met the owner, Wendy liked her immediately. It seemed a shame to buy the house and take it away from her. It would be a mess if Wendy had to ask for a lot of repairs before she closed on the place.

She had finished her tacos and Chico-fries (Tater Tots by any other name) and was feeling much more even-tempered (Malcolm had told her she got really jittery if she went too long without eating; since he didn't have a job anymore, he spent all his time observing her, and often told her things she wasn't interested in hearing, especially when they were true. It was an aspect of their new relationship she was just getting accustomed to) when a head and some shoulders stuck out through the wall of what she was already thinking of as Her House. The hair on the head was gray, not glossy black like Malcolm's. The face turned toward her, peering through the twilight. She covered her mouth with a paper napkin. Her throat was too tight for her to swallow the mouthful in her mouth.

She was seeing a Ghost.

He slipped out of the house and walked to the edge of the front lawn, staring at her with fierce eyes. She shrank back in her seat. She tried to swallow. Instead she coughed chewed Chico-fries into her napkin. The ghost shook his fist at her and yelled something, but she couldn't understand him.

"Malcolm," she squeaked, just the way she had almost twenty years earlier when they went to one of the early showings of *The Exorcist* and Linda Blair's head had turned all the way around. Back then, she had been able to bury her face in his shoulder, and feel his arm around her, even though she thought he was a—what was the word for nerd in those days? Square? She couldn't remember. It wasn't until ten years later that she had realized what a terrific human being he was and they had gotten married. But that friendly shoulder had helped plant the suspicion in her mind that he couldn't be all bad.

Malcolm materialized beside her. "Drive," he said.

She turned the key without depressing the clutch. What a racket! She couldn't seem to remember which foot did what, and her hands were shaking so badly she could hardly grip the steering wheel, but she managed to start the car and pull a wobbly U-turn. They rocketed up the street away from the house.

"What happened?" she asked in a low voice when they were parked outside their hotel room.

“I went... Wendy... I—“ He shook himself and said, “Buhuhuhuh.” Then: “I went into the crawl space under the house, and there isn’t any water there. I looked at the foundation. No cracks. It didn’t figure to me that the lady would keep the yard in such great shape and let the house fall apart. I went through the wood and I didn’t see a single termite. I checked the insulation in the roof, and it’s not even asbestos, it’s foam. The inspector was wrong about all those things, Wendy. The house is perfect.

“So I figured, no problem. We’ll move in. I wanted to find a good place for storing the locket. I walked into the family room, and old lady was sitting there reading a play, and he was looking over her shoulder and muttering. ‘Anna,’ he said, ‘you can’t do this to me. We swore we’d end our days in this house. I built it for you.’ She just turned a page without paying any attention. ‘Anna!’ he yelled. Then he looked up and saw me. ‘Get out, you damned home wrecker!’ he screamed. His eyes started glowing red and he got bigger and, and, I don’t know, I felt like I had a heart again and it was going to burst.” He was quiet for a minute. “I was ready to run a sixty yard dash in five seconds, but I didn’t know which way to jump.

“Then he went raging out of the house and I had time to get calm again. I thought, how awful for him that she doesn’t even know he’s there.”

She looked at him and he looked at her. She leaned closer. After dark, he got solid enough to hold her. He slipped his arm around her, easing closer than he would have been able to when he was alive; he could go through the seat back and still hold her tightly. It was something they had been practicing. “Then,” murmured Malcolm, “I heard you squeak.”

The realtor didn’t want Wendy speaking with the owner directly. It was the part of the negotiation that bugged Wendy the most, yet she understood that realtors didn’t want a buyer and a seller to work out their own deal and cut the realtors out of their percentage. After all, the realtor had taken Wendy to fifteen other houses. She was working for her money.

Summer twilight was finally seeping into night. Wendy clutched Malcolm’s locket in her hand and rang the doorbell.

The old man’s face, features twisted into a gargoyle’s grimace of anger, thrust out through the door. Wendy stepped back and fell off the edge of the stoop, but Malcolm steadied her from behind, his hands on her shoulders.

The door opened, pulling back through the old man, and Anna Jericho, the owner, peered out through the screen door. “Hello?” she said.

“Uh, hi,” said Wendy, straightening and tugging the front of her dress down—her half-fall had hiked it up.

“May I help you?” Anna said.

“Well, uh—I’m the buyer, Mrs. Jericho. We met this morning.”

“I know that, dear.”

“And I just wanted to—to—“ Wendy glanced over her shoulder. The neighbors weren’t all staring out their windows, but some were watching. “May I come in?”

“All right.” Anna unlatched the screen door and held it open.

Her husband stood in the doorway, his hands up in fists before him. “You may NOT come in! No, keep your distance, you evil young woman!”

Wendy took a deep breath and walked through him.

Other than a faint fizzing on her skin, the experience left her none the worse. She thought she might even be making up the fizzing because she had expected to feel something. She glanced behind her, and found the old man staring at her in horror, clutching his chest and breathing loudly with his mouth open. Psychological, no doubt, since his heart and lungs weren’t sustaining him any longer. She offered him a smile, but that just made him madder.

“Come into the family room, dear,” Anna said.

They settled on the red sofa which sat on the red plaid rug. “My husband was partial to red,” said Anna.

“I want to talk to you about him,” Wendy said. “Are you sure you want to sell the house?”

“Yes. It’s just too much for me to keep up. The garden takes a lot of looking after... well, I have a good yardman for that, but he doesn’t weed. And there’s so much space without Arturo to fill it, and so many things to keep clean, and I don’t even want to own them anymore. I’m sure Arturo would want me to take care of myself.”

“Well, I’m not,” Wendy said. “He doesn’t want you to sell the house. He says he built this house for you and you swore you’d end your days here.”

Anna paled. “What do you mean, ‘he says’?”

“His ghost says, I guess would be more accurate. His ghost is making the house look like it’s going to fall apart. His ghost has been screaming at me and my husband not to be home wreckers.”

Anna held up her hand, palm out. Her eyes shifted back and forth as if looking all around her. “Now, wait,” she said. “Now, wait. What are you talking about?”

Wendy leaned forward, putting her feet flat on the floor. She clasped her hands, put her elbows on her knees, let her clasped hands dangle in front of her. “I know this is hard, Mrs. Jericho. Maybe you won’t even believe me. But I thought the best thing to do was to tell you about it.” Her shoulders slumped and she stared at the red plaid rug.

“Are you some kind of psychic? I never even knew you were married.”

Wendy glanced up and discovered only lively interest in the older woman's face. "Well, the two are kind of connected. I never knew I was psychic until my husband died, but, you see, he's with me, even now. I started seeing him during his funeral. He's sitting over there in the rocker."

Malcolm obligingly rocked the rocker, and it moved.

"HOW are you doing that!" screamed the old man. "TELL ME!"

"Oh, my goodness," said Anna. "Oh, my goodness!"

"And your Arturo has been yelling at me for being an evil woman since I rang the doorbell. Right now, actually, he's yelling at my husband because my husband knows how to make things move and your husband doesn't."

"He was always terribly competitive. Had to have a greener lawn than Rusty and Mrs. Kay, had to have a better barbecue, had to have a bigger office at work," said Anna.

"That's right. Betray me. Stab me in the back!" Arturo cried.

"Had to have a prettier wife," said Anna, and smiled, showing her dimples.

"How can you talk like this to strangers, Anna! I was always respectful of you!"

"He says he was always respectful of you," Wendy relayed.

"Of course, of course. He knew what a prize he had in me." She dimpled again, her eyes dancing.

"Well, you see, if he doesn't find relief somehow I don't know how I can move into your house. I can see him, and he keeps screaming at me."

Anna looked up, glanced around. "Arturo!" she cried.

"What? What, what?" he said.

"What do you want?"

"I want to be with you, my little Anna," he said in a caressing voice. His face had softened; it was the first time Wendy had seen him smile.

Wendy translated.

"Well, come on then to the retirement village with me," said Anna.

"I built myself into this house. I can't leave."

Wendy and Malcolm looked at each other. Then Wendy turned to Anna and repeated word for word what Arturo had said.

Anna began to cry. Arturo stood beside the couch, holding out his hands to her but not bringing them close enough to touch or go through her. After a little while, Anna said, "How is it that your ghost husband goes with you, while mine is trapped here?"

Wendy fished the locket up on its chain from where it had been hiding inside her blouse. “This belonged to Malcolm’s mother. She died when he was six, and his father gave him the locket. He took it with him everywhere. The night we got married, he gave it to me. I think that was harder for him than any other part of our relationship, because it was like handing me a part of himself to take care of. He was always afraid I would lose it. But he gave it to me anyway.

“We’ve been talking about this ever since he returned to me. We don’t really know how it works, but we believe that when people invest themselves strongly in a physical object it can act as an anchor for them after death. Malcolm is attached to the locket. He can get about a block away from it, if he wants to; but if he goes any further than that he feels vague, like he’s about to fall apart. Our dream was to build the locket into the house so we could share the house and he could finally feel safe. But now, you see, your husband has attached to the house—“

Anna smoothed the tears away from her eyes and looked up. “The house is too big for me,” she said in a low voice. “I cannot stand it alone.”

“But Anna, you’re not alone,” said Arturo.

“I am not going to stay,” Anna said. “I simply can’t.”

“How can you break a promise like that, a life promise we made to each other?” Arturo cried.

Without hearing him, she held up her hands. “Look,” she whispered. Her hands were trembling. “And there are little gaps... I wake and find myself in the chair when a moment before I was in the bathroom, brushing my hair. Time has started slipping away from me.” She stilled her hands in her lap. “You see,” she said, and paused. She took a breath. “You see, I need help.”

“No!” Arturo cried. “We promised to take care of each other. We promised we would be strong for each other. We promised we would stand against the world together. We promised we would never need anyone but each other. Anna, you don’t even know these people!”

Wendy slid closer on the couch and reached for Anna’s hand. It trembled in her grasp.

“Anna!” cried Arturo.

“Do you remember your wedding vows?” Wendy asked Anna.

“Oh, I remember everything about our wedding, my dear, right down to the bootleg whiskey in the back room. My sister Mary and I spent hours stitching seed pearls onto the lace of my wedding dress. And every word of our vows—well, they were not so rare, in any case. Love, honor, and obey.”

“What did Arturo say to you?”

Anna sighed. “Love, honor, and cherish.”

Wendy looked at Arturo's ghost. "Sir," she said to him. "Do you love, honor, and cherish this woman more than you do your house? More than you do a promise she can't keep?"

"You don't understand," he said. He walked away through a wall.

"What?" said Anna. "What does he say?"

"He's gone."

Malcolm rose from the rocking chair. "I'll see what I can find out," he said. He followed Arturo through the wall, leaving the chair rocking gently.

"He's gone?" Anna whispered. "He doesn't forgive me, does he?" Her voice got a little louder. "He never could stand weakness in any form." She bent her head to the side, her eyes gazing at the red plaid rug. "He said we were like two pillars together. We could build a life and a family on our shoulders. He said we were strong like two foundation stones, and we could share our strength by holding hands. But his hand is not here any longer, and I am not a stone, and neither was he." She placed her hand flat over her face, covering her right eye. "Now you tell me," she murmured to the carpet, "he has been here all along, and I didn't even sense him. He told me to always lean on him when I was troubled, but how can I lean on someone I can't even see?"

Wendy rubbed her thumb over the back of Anna's hand, gently stroking the cabled veins and arteries, feeling the tendons beneath her touch.

"I have to go and live among strangers. I have to trust unknown caretakers to watch out for me. I live in the ruin of my own body and I cannot rebuild. Pride cannot mortar my walls any longer." Her hand tightened on Wendy's. "It was so hard to make this decision, but I have been contemplating it for a long time. Arturo died three years ago, and I knew... I knew I couldn't support everything we had built together. Now I've made the hardest decision of my life, and here he comes, making it much harder again. If only I could hear him and answer his arguments myself! A good fight used to clear the air for us."

Wendy frowned. "Wait. Wait." She sucked on her lower lip.

"What is it? Is he back?"

"No. What you said gave me an idea. Your body is a structure. This house is a structure. Marriage is a—I wish Malcolm and I knew all the rules!"

"What are you thinking?"

"If an idea structure could work like a physical structure—if Arturo could move into the house of your marriage, or your heart—but I've never heard of that. Of course, this is the first time Malcolm and I have met another ghost. We don't know if anybody else's ghostliness works like Malcolm's."

"If I build a house in my heart, Arturo could move into it and come with me to the retirement village, you think?" Anna glanced at Wendy. "I have him in my heart already, always; I wear him there as I wear my wedding ring on my finger."

“Does he know that? Maybe the idea won’t work, anyway. But anything’s worth trying. If he moved into something you built together, maybe you could see him—“

Malcolm walked back through the wall, pulling Arturo by the arm. Arturo’s mouth was set in a stubborn line. “Home wreckers,” he said, and tried to pull his arm out of Malcolm’s grip.

Wendy straightened. “Sir,” she said. Anna studied the direction of Wendy’s gaze, followed it.

“You are an evil young woman,” said Arturo.

“Do you want your wife to kill herself?” Wendy asked. “Is that what you really want?”

“Of course not!”

“Please be very sure. What you are doing now is the same as telling her to kill herself. She wants to take care of herself, to get the help she needs to survive. If she listens to you and chooses something too hard for her to handle, she courts death. Do you love your wife?”

The fury slowly left his face. He stopped trying to jerk his arm free of Malcolm’s grasp. After a long moment, he said, “Alive, I loved her. Dead, I love her. But it is the house that sustains me. If I leave the house I kill myself, and that is a sin against God.”

“What does he say?” Anna whispered.

“He says he loves you but he’s not sure he can leave the house.” Wendy bit her lip and said to Arturo, “We thought about structures that might sustain you. You built yourself into the house. Did you build yourself into your marriage? Anna says she carries you in her heart.”

Arturo looked at Anna. His face softened into a smile again, and then saddened. He walked to Anna and reached out a hand. It disappeared into her chest.

Suddenly another ghost smoked up out of Anna and stood half in the couch behind her, facing Arturo. It was a younger man, his hair black and thick, his eyes alight. “Who are you, old man?” he said.

Arturo staggered back. After a moment, he said, “That is how she remembers me.” He turned an angry face at Wendy. “There is no room in her heart for me!”

“You stiff-necked old donkey!” said his other ghost. “Have to have her all to yourself, do you? Death has not granted you any virtues, has it!”

“Will you leave and let me in?” Arturo asked.

“I will not leave!” said the young man. “But if you ask me very nicely perhaps I will make room for you.”

“Wait just a minute,” said Wendy. “Anna, a ghost came out of your heart and is talking to this other Arturo about both of them living in your heart together. Do you want that?”

“I don’t understand,” said Anna. She sounded very young.

“I wish, I wish you could see them,” said Wendy.

“Does she want to see us?” asked the younger Arturo. “Easy.” He reached into the back of Anna’s head, worked around in it, then said, “There.”

Anna looked up and screamed. Then she clapped her hands over her mouth. “Arturo,” she whispered. She glanced back and forth between the old Arturo and the young one.

“Arturo?” she said.

“How did you DO that?” older Arturo asked. He held up fists and shook them in frustration. “How is it everyone knows secrets except me?”

“Arturo,” said Anna, her voice a little stronger. “What did I tell you about jealousy, always?”

Older Arturo sighed. “That it is a viper’s bite on my heel and weakens me as long as it holds on,” he said. “But Anna, I am like a baby. I do not like it.”

“Of course not,” she said. She stood and took a step toward him, lifting a hand—and then the hand sank back to her side and she slowly folded toward the floor. Wendy jumped up and Malcolm did too, but it was the younger Arturo who caught her and eased her collapse onto the couch.

“As I am the man she believes and wishes I was,” said the young Arturo as Wendy rubbed Anna’s hands between hers, “I have more generosity of spirit than you do.” He beamed at Older Arturo, who gave him a ferocious frown.

“Even though it will diminish me to mingle with you, I shall do it,” said Younger Arturo.

“In you I can see clearly what Anna told me about pride being a hobble that makes you take short steps,” said Older Arturo.

Wendy and Malcolm looked at each other. They flicked their eyebrows up and down.

Younger Arturo laughed. “We heard her, but did we ever listen? If you become part of me, some things will change for you. One thing is that she becomes the center of our life. We don’t have the work, and we don’t have the house. We don’t have the evenings at the Taverna with the other men. We enter a smaller existence.”

“What do you think I’ve been doing since I died?” Older Arturo asked. “I cannot even step beyond the lawn.”

“So you are ready to join me?”

Older Arturo looked at the ceiling, lifted his arms and spread them wide as if embracing the house. “I built this well. You don’t know what it is like to be inside a board, to hear it think of the tree it once was, to speak to nails and hear their tales of hiding in the earth before the forge, to ride the currents of heat like sparks rising from a chimney....”

“You can tell me,” said Younger Arturo.

Older Arturo slowly lowered his arms and smiled at his younger self, then looked at Malcolm. His eyes narrowed. “You better be good to this place,” he said, frowning.

“Maybe you can brief me before you go,” said Malcolm.

Anna’s eyes fluttered open. “Arturo,” she said.

“Anna,” said both Arturos.

Bewildered, Anna looked at Wendy. Wendy gripped her hand. “Watch,” she said, nodding to the Arturos.

They studied each other, then walked toward each other. They grasped each other’s hands, paused a moment, staring into each other’s eyes, then pushed closer. In a shimmery moment they melted into each other, gasping, and finally a single Arturo, a midway mix between the two who had stood there a moment before, turned to look at her. “Oh, Anna,” he said, touching his hand to his heart. “I feel your heart touching mine.”

She held her hands out to him and he came to her, reached for her hands, but his passed through them. They both cried out. In distress and anger, they stared at Wendy.

“It’s not the same as being alive,” she said, “but it’s much, much better than losing a person entirely.”

“I caught her when she fell,” said Arturo.

Wendy nodded. “Sometimes you can do that.”

He frowned. “Wait. I will return in a moment,” he said, and walked out through the kitchen wall.”

“Can he come with me?” Anna asked.

“I think he’s gone to find out,” said Wendy.

Malcolm was watching the wall where Arturo had disappeared. He turned to Wendy after a moment. “Can I try something?”

“Sure,” she said.

He walked to her and reached into her chest. She gasped, then tried to figure out if she could feel him. She thought not. He pulled his hand out of her and they both looked around. There was no new Malcolm.

“I wish we had a book like the one in Beetlejuice,” he said, not for the first time.

“So this is your young man,” Anna said faintly. “Please introduce us.”

Wendy had just made introductions when Arturo returned. “I walked to the end of the block,” he said. He beamed at them all.

Wendy found herself smiling back at him. She thought about all the things she locked inside herself, groans, frowns, smiles; thought about Malcolm’s leash—how he couldn’t stray far from the locket. By buying a house, she and Malcolm would be tying themselves to a specific place. And that was a dream they had. Were they crazy?

Arturo had just slipped a leash.

“Let’s go for a drive!” he said.

“We can drive past the retirement village,” Anna said, “and you can look inside.”

They were still learning new rules. New restrictions — but new freedoms, too, Wendy thought as she rose. Malcolm put his hand on her shoulder and she felt it. She grinned over her shoulder at him.

