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HOUSE WITH DEEP THATCH

“What is the link between a Polish family murdered in WW II Poland and Wanda, a horticulture student, and her roommates, Luke, Craig and Poppy, in Chicago 2010.”

Poland, 1943. A wedding takes place in a three-story house in the countryside. The wedding party dances to polkas played by an accordionist and tambourine player. The bride and groom in traditional Polish wedding garb feed each other wedding cake. The sixteen year old daughter of the house is sent to the cellar for a pitcher of beer. As she exits the house a young German soldier in the woods nearby sees her. She walks over to the cellar, unlocks the door, leaves the key in the lock and enters.

The German soldier approaches the cellar and follows her down the steps. When he reaches the last step, he watches as a boy, 3, wearing a yarmulke, runs from the back of the cellar to the daughter. His face hardens and he hurries up the stairs, slams the door, locks it, removes the key and returns to the woods.

The German soldier returns with his company. They enter the house and round up the Poles, march them into the woods and shoot them. They set fire to the cellar. One Polish woman, pregnant, is on the back porch vomiting when she hears the commotion and hides under the porch. She holds her stomach and rubs a black and white, heraldic crow ring.

Chicago, 2010. Wanda, 28, lives in a three-story house she inherited from her parents when they were killed by a drunk driver two and a half years ago. Two roommates live in the house with Wanda, Craig, 30, a bridge engineer, and Luke, 22, gay, who works at a book store. Wanda has just been accepted into a Horticulture Program, and Luke and Craig celebrate with her. But Wanda wonders if she can do it.

Wanda rollerblades to Lincoln Park. She sees a penny on the ground and stops to pick it up. Poppy, male, 35, notices her.

At Horticulture School her teacher, Bettie, takes an interest in Wanda, and tells her she has an instinct for growing plants, a green thumb. Wanda blooms under Bettie’s guidance. Wanda has plants in every room of the house and takes good care of them: they are green, glossy and healthy. She brings home a Sansevieria Plant she transplanted at school and gives its long stalks a milk bath. She calls it “Cleopatra”.

Wanda is rollerblading when she spots a nickel on the ground. She stops to pick it up, and Poppy, who threw the nickel down, speaks to her. “Do you always stop?” “Just for money,” she answers and skates away.

A letter comes to Wanda from Richard Eckhard (Richie) who is in prison for the drunk driving that killed her parents. He tells her he’ll be getting out soon, and says he’s a different person. He’s a member of Alcoholics Anonymous and hasn’t had a drink since he came to prison even though it’s available. He tells her he’s very sorry for what he did and will be atoning for it every day of his life. Wanda crushes the letter and throws it down but picks it up again.

Next time Wanda is rollerblading she spots a quarter on the ground. As she picks it up, she notices Poppy and realizes he threw it down. She tells him she’ll keep it for her donation jar. They begin to talk and discover they’re both Polish. She asks him if he lives in the neighborhood. “Not for long. My building is being sold.” She asks where he works and then tells him she might know of a place. “We’re three roommates, and there might be room for a fourth.” “That would be very nice, Wanda.”

Poppy comes to the house with a small bouquet of daisies. “My father used to bring us flowers,” Wanda says. He meets the roommates, Craig and Luke. They agree he can move in.

Although Wanda has a green thumb she finds classes difficult. She spaces out when Bettie’s lectures become too scientific. At home she begins to have trouble with her plants; they’re drying out and dying. She starts drinking more wine than usual. Luke also starts drinking lots of Heineken. She goes to the attic, turns on the light and Poppy is sitting in a Green Velvet Chair. She screams. “What are you doing up here?” “It’s peaceful here,” he says. “It’s not peaceful downstairs?” He looks away.

She goes to the church parking lot where the hungry and homeless are fed. Richie is serving food behind one of the tables. He spots Wanda, walks over to her and asks if she read his letter. “Yes.” “Thank you, I know I don’t deserve that.” Wanda is shaken by this encounter.

At home Poppy stands in the foyer and reads a framed poem on the wall:

“If I ever become a rich man,
Or if ever I grow to be old,
I will build a house with deep thatch
To shelter me from the cold.”

Wanda joins him and says her father loved that poem. Poppy says the house feels protected, safe. They move outside and sit on the porch swing and drink wine. She asks him where his parents are? “Dead.” He tells her he grew up in St. Vincent’s Orphanage. “We’re both orphans,” she tells him.

He kisses her and they go to his room. They begin to make love when all of a sudden he stops and looks around. They kiss again, but he pulls away. “Don’t you like me?” Wanda asks. “You are a good person, Wanda.” “Is that why we’re doing this?” Poppy gets out of bed. Wanda dresses and leaves the room crying.

Strange things have been happening in the house: the garbage disposal starts by itself; lights go off in the kitchen as Luke makes a sandwich; Wanda’s mother’s sewing machine begins sewing in the middle of the night; Wanda’s plants are all dying; and as Craig changes a fuse he’s electrocuted. Luke finds him on the kitchen floor and calls the EMTs – in time to save his life.

Wanda’s school problems worsen, and she tells Bettie she’s going to quit. She says her plants are dying and accidents are happening at the house. Bettie reveals she has a well-developed sixth sense. Wanda asks, “Is that psychic?” Bettie says yes, but she keeps her school life and other life separate. Wanda begs her to come over, and Bettie says she’ll come but only to examine the plants. They agree on Halloween night.

Bettie arrives in a sunflower costume. She examines the plants as they tour the house with Luke and Craig. She sniffs. She checks the first and second floors and the basement. “What’s up there?” “The attic – all our old stuff I can’t part with.” “Stuff over your head weighs on your head,” Bettie says. She leads the way up and opens the door. It’s dark, but moonlight shines in. Poppy sits in the Green Velvet Chair.

As Bettie looks around she sees the ghosts from 1943 Poland as the accordionist and tambourine player play a polka. People dance and sing. “They’re your family?” she asks Poppy? He nods. “They can’t stay here; they must go to the light.” She tells the ghosts, “It is time for you to go to The Other Side.” “No”, says Poppy, “they want to be with me.” “They must go,” Bettie tells him. “For them and for you.” Finally she convinces the ghosts to go through the tunnel of light to The Other Side. Poppy cries.

A few weeks later Wanda looks for Poppy and can’t find him. She goes up to the attic and finds him in the Green Velvet Chair. She tells him how sorry she is, and that Bettie will talk with him if he wants to. She kisses him on the cheek, and his head falls to the side. He is dead.

Wanda screams. She goes downstairs to his room. Everything is neat and clean. She finds the heraldic crow ring on top of a note:

“This is all that is left of my family. Let it remain in the ‘House With Deep Thatch’ where we were all safe and protected.”

The House is in mourning with black fabric over the front door and black flowers in a vase on the porch. Richie drives by, sees the black and slams on the brakes. He rings the bell and Luke answers the door. “You’ve had a death?” Richie asks. “Yes.” “Who died?” “Who are you?” “I know Wanda, who died?” “Our roommate.” Finally Luke calls, “WANDA”! Wanda comes out and Richie relaxes. She and Luke invite him in for cocoa.

As the first snow falls Wanda rollerblades past the place where Poppy threw down the coins. She sees a Polish coin, stops and picks it up. Poppy’s ghost stands nearby as Wanda puts the coin to her lips. Wanda skates off, and a few seconds later Poppy’s ghost disappears.

Wanda returns to the house. She mourns the loss of the Sansevieria plant which is brown. “I’m sorry I brought you home to all this, Cleopatra.” She moves the stalk and behind it at the base is a tiny green stalk. “You’re going to live. We’re all going to live,” she says.

(scenes to follow)

HOUSE WITH DEEP THATCH

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FADE IN:

EXT. POLAND - 1943 - SUMMER - NIGHT

In the countryside a three-story house with a large front porch and long windows stands alone, not far from a WOODS. LIGHTS are on, windows are open, and a POLISH POLKA PLAYS.

INT. POLISH HOUSE - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

A WEDDING PARTY is in full swing.

BRIDE and GROOM, in traditional Polish wedding garments feed each other wedding cake.

ACCORDIONIST, man, in a black porkpie hat, PLAYS a Polish POLKA.

WOMAN, in a sparkling red skirt, accompanies him rhythmically on a TAMBOURINE.

DANCER, male, 28, in Polish folk costume, stops in the middle of a dance to chug-a-lug a STEIN OF BEER. An OLDER WOMAN tries to take it from him and he pushes her hand away.

MEN and WOMEN dance together, and WOMEN with each other.

PREGNANT WOMAN, 25, in a POINSETTIA DRESS dances slowly by herself rubbing her stomach.

CHILDREN play hide and seek.

People dance, talk, drink, eat, laugh, sing and sweat.

FATHER, 45, with a mustache, signals his DAUGHTER, 16, blonde and Slavic-pretty, to fetch more beer and points to a large glass pitcher on the table.

She picks up the pitcher, removes a KEY hanging on the wall and exits the house onto....

THE FRONT PORCH

Daughter stands for a moment. CROWS CAW-CAW CAW-CAW-CAW and she looks up. Then she walks down the stairs and over to the cellar.

EXT. WOODS NEAR POLISH HOUSE - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

GERMAN SOLDIER, 19, watches the house, and when he sees the Daughter, smiles.

EXT. POLISH CELLAR - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Daughter reaches the cellar. She HUMS to the MUSIC from the house and dances a few polka steps.

She unlocks the CELLAR DOOR, leaves the KEY in the lock and lifts up the door.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

The Soldier leaves the Woods and stealthily moves to the Cellar.

EXT. CHICAGO STREET - PRESENT - DAY

WANDA, 28, in shorts and a tee smoothly and skillfully rollerblades. She wears no kneepads, armpads or helmet.

She skates past large houses with front gardens of Gladiolas, Marigolds, Zinnias and Sunflowers.

Cars HONK at her and she waves.

EXT. LINCOLN PARK - DAY - CONTINUOUS

She enters and breathes deeply. She spreads her arms as though she would fly and skates faster on the path.

Two MEN play chess.

A COUPLE walks and holds hands.

RUNNERS jog by.

PEOPLE lie on blankets in the grass.

CHILDREN play and chase each other.

OLD PEOPLE sit on benches in the sun.

She approaches the Plant Conservatory and slows to admire the huge flowerbeds with Salvia, Gloxinia, Petunias, Marigolds and Zinnias. A DOG runs next to her for a few seconds.

She exits the Park to....

CITY STREET

As she skates, she sees a PENNY on the street. She brakes and skates back.

POPPY, 30's, tall, slender, his face sculptured down to the bones, watches Wanda.

She doesn't notice him as she picks up the coin, puts it in her pocket and takes off.

EXT. WANDA'S HOUSE - DAY - CONTINUOUS

A beautiful old GREYSTONE sits on a double corner lot. Three stories high, it has a large attic with gables and dormer windows. It resembles the Polish House.

Long windows front the house with two shabby FLOWER BOXES underneath. The lawn needs a mow; stray flowers and weeds grow in the beds.

Wanda, still on her rollerblades, holds onto the railing and climbs the steps to a large front porch. A SWING of weathered grey wood moves in the breeze.

She rolls to an oversized front door with a door knocker shaped like a FACE. She unlocks it and enters....

THE FOYER

Like a small living room with table, lamp, phone and an orange stuffed chair, this is a pleasant place to sit. Hanging from the ceiling in a basket is a Purple Heart Vine with small pink flowers.

Wanda notices mail on the table and frowns. She rolls down

THE HALL

Doors are on one side with a SIGN on one of them.

INSERT - THE SIGN, which reads:

"UNDER CONSTRUCTION"

BACK TO SCENE

As she moves through the Hall she reaches up and touches the offshoots hanging from a Spider Plant. She rolls into....

THE KITCHEN

A friendly room with walls of yellow and a round wooden table and chairs. A Goldheart Ivy plant, with lustrous green leaves splashed yellow in the middle, hangs from the ceiling. Rosemary grows tall in a pot on the windowsill.

White coffee mugs hang on the wall, some with names painted on them. Craig's mug has a bridge painted behind his name; Luke's has a book around his; and Wanda's has rollerblade wheels under hers. A sunflower cup and petunia cup have no names.

She opens a cabinet, removes the PENNY from her pocket and drops it into a glass JAR filled with money.

A MAGNET, on the refrigerator covered with them, catches Wanda's attention.

INSERT - THE MAGNET which shows a woman drinking from a martini glass and reads:

"Medicated and Motivated"

BACK TO SCENE

Wanda shakes her head. She rolls back through the Hall into....

THE FOYER

Wanda picks up the mail and flips through it. She stops at a letter from New Illinois University and holds it up to the light. She flaps it back and forth, fans herself with it and looks toward the living room.

WANDA

Anybody home?

LUKE (O.S.)

We're here, Wanda.

She rolls into....

LIVING ROOM

A gracious room it has a large Oriental rug, baby grand piano and shelves filled with leather-bound books. No T.V. A large Jade plant sits on a table, and a grand split-leaf Philodendron near the window reaches toward the sun. They are green and healthy.

LUKE, 22, gay and slender and CRAIG, 29, tall and heavyish, sit and read - Craig the newspaper and Luke a book.

LUKE

Have a good skate?

WANDA

I did. Then I got this.

She holds up the letter. Craig puts the paper down.

LUKE

What is it?

WANDA

From the university.

Luke closes his book.

LUKE

Your acceptance letter.

WANDA

I hope so, I can't open it.

CRAIG

Why not?

WANDA

I don't know what it says.

LUKE

Do you want me to open it?

Wanda shakes her head.

CRAIG

Count to three and just do it.

LUKE

Ready? Here goes - one, two,
three!

Wanda tears the letter open and reads aloud.

WANDA

"Congratulations, Ms. Paxton! We
are pleased to inform you that
you've been accepted into the
Horticulture Program, fall
semester."

She crosses her arms over her chest and looks at them with
tears in her eyes.

WANDA

Ohhh, they let me in!

Luke stands and pats her arm.

LUKE

Yea! Wanda. Good going, Girl.

CRAIG
 Congratulations.

Wanda holds the letter up high and rolls around.

WANDA
 I'm a student, a horticulture
 student!

She looks around.

WANDA
 Let's celebrate!

She rolls out of the room.

She rolls back in with a bottle of red wine and three
 glasses. She gives the bottle to Luke, he opens it and pours.
 They hold up their glasses high.

WANDA
 To school!

They sip. Luke toasts her.

LUKE
 Wanda!

CRAIG
 Education!

They sip.

WANDA
 Horticulture!

LUKE
 Flowers!

CRAIG
 Vegetables!

LUKE
 Sometimes I think about going to
 school.

☺ WANDA
 What would you study?

LUKE
 English literature.

He looks around.

LUKE
Or... Chef school!

WANDA
Chef school!

CRAIG
Luke, a chef? You can practice on me.

LUKE
If you do the prep.

CRAIG
Prep?

Luke and Wanda laugh.

WANDA
To Chef-iculture!

CRAIG
Career!

LUKE
My three famous sandwiches-peanut butter & mango, scrambled egg with tomato and jalapeno, and tuna salad with pineapple? I don't know if I'm ready.

WANDA
Me neither, I hope I can do it.

CRAIG
School's a routine: classes, papers, exams. You build the habit, and you're okay.

WANDA
You make it sound so easy.

LUKE
Yeah, why don't you go back for a masters? You've got the habit.

CRAIG
I have a job.

WANDA
You think I can do it?

LUKE
 You can do it, Girl. Look at your
 plants, how alive they are.

He touches the Jade plant.

CRAIG
 He's right. Look at that one.

He points to the Philodendron.

CRAIG
 So healthy it shines.

WANDA
 Really?

They nod.

INT. BUS - DAY

Next to Wanda on the seat is a Marigold plant. Through the window she sees a little GIRL walking with her MOTHER. She looks down at the Marigold.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Wanda waves to the ATTENDANT as she enters the gate holding the marigold. She walks to....

A double, upright HEADSTONE with engraved flowers on it.

PAXTON
 Adam Henia
 1955 1953
 2008 2008
 In Most Loving Memory

WANDA
 Hi, Mom, Dad. Guess what? They
 accepted me into the horticulture
 program.

She touches the headstone.

WANDA
 They only accept twelve students
 each semester.

She whispers.

WANDA
 What if I can't do it?

She listens.

WANDA

I know you don't hear me, but I hear you, Mom, "Whether you believe you can do a thing or not, you're right." You and Henry Ford.

Wanda takes a trowel out of her purse.

WANDA

You always believed I could do anything I wanted.

She digs a hole, knocks the Marigold out of the pot and sets it in the ground. She pats down the dirt.

WANDA

But I'm still scared. Don't forget what happened the last time.

She looks around.

WANDA

I wish I had some water.

She sits down on the grave.

WANDA

Why aren't you here?... I need you here. The only thing I can do is plant. Mom, you always said my thumb was *zielony*. I wish my brain was green too like yours and Dad's.

EXT. CITY STREET - DAY

Poppy, alert, watches the street. As he sees Wanda approach on rollerblades, he tosses a NICKEL into the street and pretends to walk away. Wanda sees the coin, brakes, rolls back and picks it up.

POPPY

Do you always stop?

WANDA

Just for money.

POPPY

Nothing else?

She shakes her head.

POPPY

How about a lamp?

She shakes her head.

POPPY

A chair?

She shakes her head.

POPPY

What about a birdcage?

Wanda smiles.

POPPY

Could you skate down the street
with a birdcage?

WANDA

I never saw a birdcage I liked.

They laugh. Wanda skates away.

POPPY

See you.

She waves backwards at him.

INT. POLISH CELLAR - NIGHT

A dim LIGHT shines from a single bulb.

The Daughter walks down stone steps to a dirt floor.

Shelves with jars of homemade canned fruits and vegetables
line the walls.

She moves to a beer barrel in the corner and sets down the
pitcher. She turns on the spigot and fills it.

The Soldier creeps down the stairs, stops on the last step
and watches the Daughter with admiration.

A red ball rolls across the floor from the back of the
cellar, followed by a BOY, 3, wearing a YARMULKE.

The Boy sees the Daughter, laughs and runs to her.

The Soldier spots the Boy, surprised, then his face hardens.

The Boy sees him and grips the Daughter tight.

She turns around, sees the German Soldier and screams.

The Soldier runs up the stairs.

EXT. CELLAR - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

The Soldier climbs out and SLAMS the door. He sees the KEY in the lock, turns it and pockets it. He runs back to the woods.

POUNING on the door is drowned out by MUSIC from the house.

INT. NEW ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY - CLASSROOM - DAY

Long benches with stools fill the room. Eleven STUDENTS, eighteen to sixty-five years old, sit. A large table faces the class.

Wanda enters, looks around, at her watch, and moves to an empty seat in the front row.

BETTIE, 45, the teacher, holding books in one arm and a SANSEVIERIA plant in the other, hurries in. A pleasant, good-natured woman, she smiles at the students.

She drops the books on the table and holds up the Sansevieria with long, stiff leaf blades and green and yellow zebra markings.

BETTIE

Welcome to Horticulture 101. I'm Bettie Novak, your teacher, and this is Sansevieria. To some of you - Mother-In-Law's Tongue or Snake Plant.

Wanda relaxes a little.

BETTIE

I'm glad to see all of you. I know some of you have been growing things all your life--

She glances at Wanda.

BETTIE

--and some of you are just starting. You're all in the right place.

She holds up the Sansevieria.

BETTIE

You can see how the stalks are overgrown and bunched up. It needs division and then transplanting. So why don't we go out to the Greenhouse.

Everyone rises and follows Bettie.

INT. GREENHOUSE - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Long metal tables with mesh tops, are filled with ferns, cactus, herbs, new cuttings, seedlings, all at different stages of growth.

Bettie stops at an empty table sets down the Sansevieria. Wanda and the other Students gather around the table. Bettie lays the plant on its side and knocks all around the pot. The plant loosens, and she removes it from the pot.

BETTIE

I'm going to separate the leaves and roots now. This process is called division.

Wanda watches Bettie, transfixed, as a small smile begins.

Bettie separates the roots and leaves and removes a stalk or two from the bunch, leaving a clump of dirt at the roots. She does it again and again.

BETTIE

Be careful when you separate the roots not to tear them.

Bettie points to a side room, the Potting Shed.

BETTIE

We're going to transplant these. Go into the Potting Shed and fill a pot with soil.

The Class moves to the Potting Shed. Wanda stands a moment and watches Bettie separate the Sansevieria. Bettie looks up and smiles at Wanda.

LATER

The Students gather around the table, in front of each one a four-inch green plastic pot with one or two Sansevieria stalks in it. Bettie looks at each one and adjusts a stalk here, removes soil there, adds more soil here.

BETTIE

Now go and water them.

The Class waters the Sansevierias and returns.

BETTIE

Good jobs.

WANDA

How do we care for it.

Bettie nods.

BETTIE

Yes. Sansevieria is an easy plant to care for. Anyone who has difficulty growing other plants will find this one very manageable.

The Students look around at each other.

BETTIE

Sansevieria trifasciata. I'd like you to know genus and species of the plants. Someone in Finland or Kenya might not know Snake Plant, the common name, but they'll know *Sansevieria trifasciata*. It's our international language.

Wanda nods.

BETTIE

Now this particular species is hearty and strong. And it doesn't like full sun so give it minimal sun or shade.

STUDENT

Inside or outside?

BETTIE

It doesn't matter.

STUDENT

How much water?

BETTIE

Oh, touch the soil; if it's dry,
water it. An easy plant. One more
thing, if you clean the leaves
with milk, the fat in the milk
makes the foliage bright and
glossy.

WANDA

What a nice plant.

BETTIE

You almost can't hurt it or even
kill it.

(continued)