# G O N E T O S E E D

o one had seen the woman who lived at 256 Woodland Drive since early November. Now it was late April and the house looked abandoned. A modern masterpiece, set back

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from the road and surrounded by gardens, it had once been the neighborhood’s biggest attraction. Real estate brokers ferrying cli- ents contemplating a move to the suburbs had gone out of their way to drive past it. Now the gardens had grown wild and a gutter dangled from the roof. The children across the street speculated that the owner, like so many unfortunate old ladies before her, had probably been eaten by cats. Their mother assured them that couldn’t have happened as she cast a worried look at the family pet. The owner’s name was Harriett Osborne, and though she wasn’t new to the neighborhood, few people on Woodland Drive could claim to know her. For over a decade, she and her husband had left for work early each morning, and if they returned, it was late at night. The two would vanish completely for days at a time, but while they were gone, the house rarely seemed empty. Twice a week at nine on the dot, a small army of cleaners and gardeners descended on the property. The curtains on the tall street-facing windows were yanked open and the house’s interior was revealed to all. Cars passing by often slowed or pulled over. The house de- veloped a significant social media following after influencers chris-

tened it a monument to good taste.

When the Osbornes were profiled in the country’s most presti- gious shelter magazine, newsstand sales spiked in the vicinity of

Mattauk, New York. The couple had no children or dogs that would have forced them to engage with the community—and no desire to mingle with their neighbors at any of the coastal town’s seafood- themed festivals. So the residents of Mattauk made do with what little they could glean from the article. Chase Osborne was the chief creative officer at a Manhattan advertising agency best known for a long-running campaign that featured a family of talking pigs. Harriett Osborne ran a rival company’s new business department. They both appeared to be well-preserved specimens in their mid- to late forties. Chase had a tattoo on his neck and wore his blue suit without socks. Harriett’s chunky black glasses framed intelligent eyes, and her matte red lipstick drew attention to a subtle smirk. When the attractive pair weren’t off traveling the world, they split their time between their house in Mattauk and an equally stunning penthouse in Williamsburg. The Osbornes, the author of the article more than implied, were leading the kind of life readers should have been living.

Then, at some point in September, the cleaners and gardeners

failed to arrive for work at the Osborne house. They were no-shows later that week as well. Once the neighbors began comparing notes, it became clear that Chase Osborne hadn’t been home in a month. Not long after, on the night before Halloween, a blond woman was spotted walking up Woodland Drive in a rain-drenched velvet skirt with no coat to cover it, her feet barefoot and a pair of three-inch Acne pumps in her hands. It wasn’t until she pulled out a set of keys and unlocked the front door that the witnesses realized it was Harriett Osborne.

After that, the interior of 256 Woodland remained hidden from view—and so did Harriett. She wasn’t dead yet. Passersby often spotted a shadowy figure in the garden at night. When the sun was shining, she received regular visitors. The UPS man arrived every

day but Sunday and deposited a mound of boxes outside her door. They would wait there for hours until no one was watching, and then somehow disappear all at once. On Tuesdays and Fridays, a young man from the grocery store would show up like clockwork at six fifteen p.m., his arms loaded with paper bags. The door would open, and he would step over the threshold, only to emerge pre- cisely one hour later with empty hands.

IT WAS ON JUST SUCH an evening at seven fifteen that Jeremy Aver- sano happened to be walking a borrowed cockapoo past the Os- bornes’ house. He let the dog root around in the foliage while the delivery boy backed out of Harriett’s drive. Just as the car reached the curb, Jeremy waved to the young man and gestured for him to stop. The window lowered and Jeremy leaned over with an avun- cular smile.

“Yeah?” The delivery boy was twentysomething and movie star handsome.

“Everything okay in there?” Jeremy asked.

The young man grinned broadly, revealing an impressive assort- ment of teeth. “What?” He sounded both confused and amused. The vehicle reeked of pot.

“The lady inside—she doing all right?”

“You’re eighty feet from her door, bro. Why don’t you ask her?” After a moment of stunned silence, Jeremy shook off his embar- rassment. The kid was clearly a moron. “Forget it. Sorry to bother

you.”

Jeremy stepped back from the window and waited for the car to drive away. Then he looked up at the house. The sun had dipped below the horizon, but as usual, the house lights hadn’t turned on. In the growing darkness, the abundant foliage felt primal and

threatening. God only knew what it might be hiding. Jeremy’s wife had recently filed for divorce, and their house at 261 Woodland was now on the market. An eyesore just down the street would strip thousands off their asking price. Something had to be done.

Jeremy was on the verge of marching right up to the front door and offering to mow the lady’s lawn himself. But when he tugged on the cockapoo’s leash, the dog resisted. Its head was still stuck in the brambles that had sprung up around the Osborne woman’s lawn. Annoyed, Jeremy gave the leash a yank. The dog yelped, but refused to budge, forcing him to reel it in like a fish. When the beast’s head emerged, Jeremy realized there was something clamped between its jaws. The object was fleshy, faintly gray in color, and ended in five limp fingers. The dog, whose name he could never remember, dropped its discovery at Jeremy’s feet.

Later, as he was speed-walking home, Jeremy made a mental list of the neighbors who might have seen him stumbling back- ward into the gutter while the dog mocked him with its slobbery grin. (As it turned out, only one person had witnessed the scene. Unfortunately, that person was a twelve-year-old with a popular TikTok account, whose video of the incident would break platform records.) After the tumble, which left his Dockers stained with sludge, Jeremy had crept toward the object with his palm poised to shield his eyes. He was one hundred percent certain the dog’s discovery had recently belonged to a human. Upon closer inspection, however, it appeared to be a species of mushroom. *A monstrosity*, Jeremy fumed as he cut across his own perfectly manicured lawn. If that was the kind of revolting fungus the Osborne woman was introducing to the neighborhood, the gloves would need to come off. It didn’t matter *what* people whispered about her. He wasn’t afraid to take her on. So as soon as he was safely inside his 1950s Cape Cod, Jeremy pulled out his phone and dialed an old friend, Brendon Baker.

UNTIL MARCH, BRENDON BAKER HAD never missed a meeting of the Mattauk Homeowners Association. His encyclopedic knowledge of the rules, and his fervor for enforcing them, had helped him rise from member to treasurer to president of the organization in rec- ord time. When he moved to Mattauk five years earlier, he’d been appalled by the town’s lackadaisical approach to landscaping. In the spring, the grass on half the town’s lawns had been allowed to grow far past the two-inch limit. In autumn, piles of leaves were left to molder for months. It took a single HOA gathering for Bren- don to identify the problem. The board was composed of former stay-at-home moms who seemed far more interested in sourcing organic mulch for the playground or building beaches for babies than in enforcing regulations. When Brendon decided to run for a seat on the board, he went door-to-door every weekend, when he knew the husbands would be home. It was time, he convinced the men he met, for the HOA to finally get serious.

As soon as Brendon was elected president, he made good on his

promise. Everyone he spoke with agreed that Mattauk had never looked better. Then, in March, complications from a hemorrhoid operation kept him home for a month. Brendon had never placed much faith in his HOA colleagues, and he knew work would pile up while he was away. But he’d never imagined that a dire situation like 256 Woodland Drive would remain unaddressed for so long.

His first day back from medical leave, Brendon walked into the HOA board meeting ten minutes late and dropped his leather mes- senger bag down on the table with a satisfying thump. Instead of claiming a seat, he crossed his arms over his fleshy chest and stood with his thighs pressed against the table’s edge, displaying his crotch for the five women who’d been waiting. He’d done this often, even before his condition had made sitting a challenge. His fellow board members couldn’t be certain he chose the posture on purpose, but all agreed it was completely revolting.

As usual, there was no chitchat. Brendon preferred to get straight to business. “Have any of you been down Woodland Drive lately?” he barked at his colleagues.

They all had. Woodland Drive was a main route to the train sta- tion. But no one in the room spoke up. They’d known this moment was coming, and they’d made a pact.

Their silence only fed Brendon’s indignation. “Does anyone here know”—he glanced down at his phone and the notes he’d taken—“a woman named Harriett Osborne?”

A couple pairs of eyes inadvertently darted in the same direction. “Celeste?” Brendon asked.

“Yes, I know her.” Celeste Howard had won a seat on the board the previous fall after her youngest had started kindergarten. She was a perfect example of the kind of woman the HOA attracted, Brendon thought. Her most recent work experience was limited to changing diapers and singing nursery rhymes. He suspected that just like the rest of them, Celeste had no real interest in community management. For her, the board was a social club—and a sad at- tempt to justify the fancy education she’d wasted.

“Is the Osborne woman a friend of yours?” he asked.

“Harriett used to work with my husband. I can’t call us friends.” Celeste considered herself more of a secret admirer. Years earlier, when Celeste and her husband had started out in the advertising business, most of their equals had been women. Then Andrew was tapped on the shoulder to become the COO’s latest protégé. The higher he rose, the less estrogen there seemed to be in the atmo- sphere. Harriett was one of the few women who never slipped or got shoved off the ladder. She managed to hold on far longer than Celeste had. In fact, for a while, everyone had assumed Harriett

would be the company’s first female president.

“Last night, I received an anonymous tip from one of Harriett Osborne’s neighbors,” Brendon announced. As a favor, he’d prom-

ised to keep Jeremy’s name out of it. Situations such as these were likely to become emotionally charged. “I have to say, I had a hard time believing what the gentleman told me. So I drove past the house, and turns out, it was true. The place is a jungle. What the hell happened to all of the gardeners?”

The question was directed at Celeste. She knew he would wait until she responded. “It seems they’ve stopped showing up.”

“You think? And where is the husband?” Brendon asked. “My source says he hasn’t been in town since last fall.”

This time, Celeste refused to speak. She failed to see how Harri- ett’s marital status had anything to do with her lawn.

“He’s gone,” someone else confirmed. Chase Osborne was, by all accounts, living in the couple’s Brooklyn apartment with the head of his agency’s production department.

Brendon nodded as if everything suddenly made sense.

“I believe Harriett might be going through a bit of a rough patch,” Celeste offered. She wasn’t going to give him any more than that.