

## That House

We lived in that house the way anyone lives. We lived loudly, with flared tempers and time-outs and trash by the curb every Wednesday. Our noise was inconstant; the cacophony faded when rowdy day bled into dusk, then blended, like watercolors do, into inky night. Once the sunlight drained from the sky, we found ourselves lamp-lit, calm, then conscious-less in sleep, curled close under blankets beneath the canopy of our four-poster bed until blinking morning. Over breakfast we sat, resolute and thoughtful, our waking minds whirring into words, daily dialogues that moved us through trial, triumph, and tribulation like a ritual. Later there were two kids too, in that same house, toddling unsteady on the polished floors, sailing through the rooms like stubborn boats leaving a trail not of spray and seafoam but of toys, dolls, trains, in their wake.

Slowly, we added to that house items plucked from outside, assimilated them into those rooms until they became quotidian. The closets ebbed and flowed with the new fashions, new jobs, new length of the child's arm after that growth spurt when all the old shirts had to go, or rather be handed down and move, as a person might, down the hall. Upon empty-for-summer hooks we now placed winter coats and scarves, then emptied them again; cabinets and cubbies were stuffed with knicks and knacks bought, bargained for at yard sales, received as presents, but packed regardless into nooks and crannies. And we, contented, crowded onto the sofa with cups of steaming cocoa like a storybook, sat smack in the center of that house, and trained our tired eyes upon the television set, four sets of eyes, rather three because the father it seems had just fallen asleep, observing the same film, watching the same ice skater breathless as she sticks the landing and the stern judges applaud, at last.

Through the dragging days, bits of that house grew sullen with wear and tear. They fell off, broke expensively, needed to be fixed. The children took a tray, cautious, from the oven with mittened hands, and delivered a cookie upstairs to the handyman fixing the roof, and the next day those children, in matching pajamas, brought bottled water outside to the landscapers who were trimming the hedges in the yard. And we were downstairs doing paperwork, cordial, with blue or black pen looped into signatures on this line here, now here, now right down there, because it is tax season but also for another reason that the daughters do not know and will be told formally, not yet, but soon.

But still, gradually, the photo albums, volumes of all sizes, were stacked upon the bookshelves in that house, layers of sediment, mapping time for archeologists of the future. And the dig will be fruitful; a family was here, they can tell, and the site will be filled not with rock and dirt and bits of broken china but with our snapshots: the four of us slung with smiles posing, birthday parties with friends, the children on the front steps - tulle-covered, sashed, beaded - for special occasions, yearly Easter egg hunts in the yard, and the mundane daily happenings that were deemed too wrought and priceless to forget. The father removed a picture from the rest and tucked it in his wallet. It was the image, already growing faint and frayed, where the younger child stood on a wooden stool, sock-footed, before a large brass skillet, one hand braced against the counter and the other clasping firmly to that father's blurry arm. He took the photo with him when he moved out of that house, prematurely, sighing, an unexpected turn of events in the long run, but when approached, examined from close up as a detective might, yes, my dear Watson, the only logical outcome.

We stayed in that gallant, three-storied house, large with one less body roaming the rooms but not forsaken, inhabited lovingly nonetheless. The stocked shelves of toys and trinkets gathered semi-dust, untouched for weeks at a time but unforgotten, and the not-so-young ones sat at their desks, taking on roles of essayists and mathematicians, rather than those with which they had once made it big, of princesses, pirates, spies. The phone rang, as shrill and joyful a sound as an inanimate object could muster, twice, before being silenced by the press of a button and a daughter's greeting to a disembodied voice: plans for her and the sister too, of course, to visit the father, his small apartment in the next town, for the weekend. On Monday we three granted ourselves a reprieve from papers and calculation, reaching into one of the never ending cabinets upon which paints, brushes, multicolored string, felt, glitter had been placed. Music played from the stereo as shapes appeared in Tempera colors on our canvases, each a vastly different masterpiece but alike in the sureness of the strokes, the certainty of committing pigment to a space that, moments before, was white.

We left that house the way anyone leaves. We left despondently, with boxes and packing peanuts, and photographs of the things we couldn't take, no matter how hard we tried: the spiral of the banister, the smooth marble fireplace, the patterned wallpaper dotted with verdant topiary trees. Our empty rooms, lacking the acoustics of a cave echoed not with sound but with memory.

We brought forth our recollections of former times into the spotless depths of the den, the kitchen, and like a boomerang, they returned to us, resounding, like ripples in a pond, reminding us of the moment of impact, the casseroles we'd baked in that oven, the eggs we'd flipped on that stovetop, the dishes we'd left in that sink. Invisible but felt, our lives dripped down the walls in tainted rivulets, to be scrubbed clean away by the inhabitants to come. The children, ever-so-slightly tearstained, thanked that house as I closed and locked the door, and we three, pilgrims, weary somehow at the onset of the journey, before it had even begun, stood in that driveway for the last time, and wished that house farewell.