

Home Again, Home Again

The house sits in the middle of its street, surrounded by green. The street is in a quiet neighborhood, close enough to the town or the city or the village to go when you need, but far enough away that it feels like a small world of its own. The people who live on the street live quiet lives; even though they're friendly they mostly keep to themselves. You like that. It's been a long year and you'd rather be alone. You don't remember the house, though you feel sure you must have walked this street before. You've lived here all your life. And surely you'd remember this place.

But only now, running from your broken relationship, or your broken family, or your broken job—your whole broken past, really—do you really see it.

There are stone steps from the street, crumbling around the edges but solid overall. "Just like me," you say, joking, but there's no one there to hear you. You fall quiet, a little embarrassed, as if you had told a joke at a funeral. At the top of the steps the ground slopes up toward the house, a wide expanse of grass, even and soft, mown but not so close-cropped that you can't imagine the feel of it against your feet, so much that you long to slip your shoes off. Wiggle your toes amongst the blades. But again, the thought embarrasses you a little. You walk.

The yard is overshadowed, in a very literal sense, by a huge oak tree to your right. It's roughly halfway between the street and the house, tall and spreading. At this time of year the leaves are just beginning to turn, deepening toward scarlet against the sharp blue of the sky. It's nearly twice the height of the house. How old does a tree have to be to get that tall? You pause

beside it, gazing up into the branches. Ten feet up, a large branch forks off of the main trunk, and a few feet along its length you can see the remnants of two ropes. They are tied two or three feet apart, thick sturdy rope, each hanging down like vines before fraying to an end after fifteen or sixteen inches.

An old rope swing, perhaps. How long ago was that? You wonder how many lives have passed through this place, and then suddenly you have a vision—no, more than a vision, a vivid waking dream. You see the yard and the tree in a bright technicolor wash, and see that it was indeed a swing, with a wooden seat attached to the two long ropes. There is someone you can't quite see in the seat, and they are swinging toward you in the Hammer film light. You raise your arms, bracing for the impact, and then you are back in the ordinary air, watching the old broken ropes swaying slightly in the breeze. Is that a fading breath of laughter, or just the wind through the leaves?

Best go in now.

There is a porch across the front of the house, and steps that lead up to it. Beside the steps are flower beds, empty now that summer is fading, but well-tended and ready for the cold. There must be a Caretaker. Someone loves and tends to this place.

The porch creaks as you mount it. It is cool under its roof. The shades are drawn in the downstairs windows, but you think you catch a shimmering movement out of the corner of your eye, a furtive shift as if someone dropped a curtain just as you looked. Or maybe the weird daydream by the tree is still hovering, playing tricks. There is a welcome mat, but it is too faded to read.

The door is painted a bright green, and in the center is a brass knocker shaped like a cat with a fiddle. The cat's face is somehow off-kilter, its smile too wide, and you stop yourself

before lifting the knocker. Even though you know full well you're expected, you wonder if it might be better not to announce your arrival, not just yet.

The doorknob turns easily in your hand, and then you're standing in the foyer. There are doors to either side, and a large sweeping staircase leading to a mezzanine above you at the back of the space. A grandfather clock stands sentinel against the wall opposite the stairs. The floor is hardwood, old but clean and polished. The walls have a fresh coat of paint, a pale blue like a robin's egg, and you can still smell the paint and turpentine. You are surprised by how fresh it appears, that a house this old could clean up so well.

But even as you think this, you begin to notice small marks, imperfections and accidental marrings. They are subtle, but you can't unsee them once they've been noticed. There is a blue and red floor runner in front of the door, and from beneath one corner you see the faint outline of a stain spilling out. It is lighter than the floor except for the curving edge, which is a dark red approaching black, like the photo negative of a chalk outline. Smaller stains, like footprints, mark a path toward the door on your right. There is a mark on the wall halfway up the stairs, a place where the plaster has been shattered, leaving a crater an inch across. The paint beneath is a deep red that shows against the robin's egg like a drop of blood in snow.

The loudest thing in the foyer is the ticking of the grandfather clock, but underneath you catch a snatch of something else. It's behind the door to your left, and leaning close to the brass keyhole it comes clearer. Someone is crying in that room, deep grieving sobs that form a throbbing fist in your throat. Sadness rolls through the door like a tide, and you know you can't go in that room yet.

The door across the hall is unlocked, and you trail through the empty rooms beyond, trying to forget the crying woman behind the other door. The furniture here is covered by sheets

like in an old movie, the shapes at once strange and familiar, like returning to a childhood home long after another family has lived it into difference. The fireplace is empty, but you can smell old smoke, mixed with a coppery smell that tastes like pennies in your mouth. A picture frame is face down on the mantle, but you can't bring yourself to turn it over. Somehow you know who's memorialized behind that cracked glass, and once again you're not ready. It's still early, and you know you've got time.

Further in you come upon the bathroom, where the wallpaper is faded from years of steam, and someone has left a single, muddy footprint in the tub. On the edge of the sink is a friendship bracelet, woven out of black and red string, faded with age and still knotted. It has been cut neatly in two by something sharp. You reach to pick it up, but are distracted by a noise from behind you before you touch it.

The noise, a shuffling movement like someone silently dancing, came from the room at the back, which is bare of furnishings. Its windows are uncovered, and you squint a little in the late afternoon sunlight slanting through the wavy glass. You cross the floor and peer out the back window. The back yard is green and expansive. You can't quite see the far end of it; it trails away into haze and the gleam of what looks like light on water. Directly below the window is a garden plot, full of autumn gourds, all orange and yellow. Among the vines are three piles of earth, vaguely oblong, each around five feet long, where the ground has been dug and filled in. A single rose has been laid on each one. The yard is empty, and the impression you had of a tall man kneeling in the dirt to your left must surely have been an illusion.

In another room you find a door to the basement. The steps are old, much older than anything else you've seen, roughly cut from stone and descending sharply into darkness. The cold dry air that creeps from the yawning black smells of dirt and dust. The push-button light

switch doesn't work—either a bulb is burnt out or the wiring is bad. You close the door and go back out to the foyer and up the stairs.

The landing is a miniature version of the foyer--two doors, one on either side, and fifteen feet of hardwood between them. There are deep scratches in the floor here, parallel marks gouged into the floor like something heavy has been drug across the wood. Or like claws. The doors here have small brass plates screwed into the plaster. Long ago they had words etched on them, but all that remains now is the faintest of suggestions, enough to tease. The doors, like the ones downstairs, are of oak, and you'd like to show them to someone, to say, "look at this. Isn't this beautiful," but you know the person you'd most like to show it to is far out of reach now. Even before you came in the house, they wouldn't have heard you.

The sobbing from downstairs has gotten louder, and weirdly you have a clearer sense of who's behind that door, why they can't stop crying. There is a feeling in your chest like a corkscrew twisting slowly into the meat of your heart. You open the door on your right.

The rooms here mirror the ones below, but the furniture is odd. There are only chairs, lined against the wall by the dozen, chairs of all kinds and ages. Simple wooden chairs, ladder-back department store chairs, overstuffed easy chairs, velvet-covered straight-backed chairs like little thrones, and one tiny chair, made perhaps for a child, but draped in blue and green cloth. The sunset through the old glass falls on this little chair like a spotlight, and for a moment you smell flowers, jasmine you think, but then a cloud passes over the setting sun and the smell fades with the light.

The two other rooms up here are similarly filled with old furniture. Chests of drawers and bedframes and glass-topped tables and paintings all stacked and piled. It feels like the backstage of a theater, or a workroom in a museum. Some the pieces here are very, very old, and some are

factory-floor new. On the floor are piles of old things: shoeboxes full of paper, dog collars, puzzles, little books and knick-knacks. A small pearl-handled gun and an old cap dyed a deep red. There is a roll of butcher's paper and a broken CD player. A shovel with fresh dirt on the blade.

When you enter the furthest room you are certain a woman in a white dress is standing against the wall to your left, facing away from you, her head laying on her raised arm, but when you startle and turn toward her, there are only shadows. You hear a snatch of music fading on the air. You leave the way you came in.

You cross the mezzanine to the other door. There are nails driven into the threshold here, you can see them silver against the dark wood. As you look at them, something moves behind the door in front of you. It's a slow, sliding sound, like someone is dragging something heavy and wet, and simultaneously you hear a sigh behind you. It's just over your right shoulder, a sound of resigned sadness, of a woman accepting defeat. You feel a puff of breath against your ear. But when you turn you are alone on the mezzanine.

But not quite alone, not really. You can feel the weight of history here, of others who have stood where you now stand. Layers of the past, rippling like water in a grotto, exposing glimpses of other people, other places, other times. Other tragedies.

There is a word for that, you remember.

Over the railing you see something lying on the floor of the foyer below you. It's a small rectangle of colored paper. You move down the stairs, past the bullet hole in the wall, into the foyer. The sun has dropped now, and the foyer is heavy with shadows. The floor is smooth and unblemished (the stain was just a trick of the light, right? It must have been). The crying is much louder now, as if the woman in the downstairs room has moved closer to the door.

You bend to pick up the paper from the floor. It's stiff and waxy, six inches by four. You turn it over and realize it's a Tarot card, from a beautiful hand-drawn deck. The image on it is so life-like, so familiar. You raise it closer to your eyes.

But then you hear the turning of a knob. The door across the hall opens. You look up and see the figure standing in the doorway. Her eyes are stains in the fabric of the house. The knot in your chest finally slips, and a single sob escapes your open mouth.

You know you've come home.

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