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# Dream House

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ON MY DAYS OFF I TEND TO RUSH IN TO THE SHRUB OAK LIBRARY in a long wool coat covered with cat hair. I'm a mess: my socks are visibly mismatched in the pink Mary Jane Crocs I wear, and my hair, wet and unbrushed after swimming, is covered in a pashmina scarf. But the librarians don't lift an eyebrow. They wait on me as kindly as they do anyone else, even though I look a little different, almost like I don't belong here . . . Oh, but I do.

When I leave the library, I try not to look across the street at the house directly opposite, a magnificent white Victorian with green shutters and a gray mansard roof. The house is three stories high, but on one side a Norway pine, maybe eighty feet tall, towers above it. I know the inside—the heavy front doors, four inches thick, the foyer with the closet under the stairs and its triangular door, the window with the yellow stained-glass border that looks back at the library. I grew up in that house.

Sometimes I can't help myself. I cross over to walk by and peer at the cars in the driveway. I look at the hammock the new owners have set up, and the aboveground pool. *Nouveau riche*, I think, a little jealously. But the details don't matter. They are strangers; this house doesn't belong to me anymore. The house that belongs to me is a memory house.

BACK IN THE NINETEEN SIXTIES, when I was seven, I moved here with my family, from New York City. There were four of us—my tall,

handsome father; my short, vivacious mother; my three-year-old brother; and me. I was a solemn girl with large brown eyes and straight bangs; my brother, lighter and more charming, laughed more.

It was my father's house—the first day we saw it he had fallen in love with the high ceilings and odd triangular closets and third-floor windows that opened out like little doors—and so we had come. My father was a writer and an aesthete, the kind of man who would walk through the house with a college friend, the two of them quoting Milton, or listen to Bach in the living room, seated in an armchair with his head thrown back, a glass of sherry in his hand. Over the years, he filled his dream house with art, books, and furniture that reflected his broad-ranging tastes. There was a Morris Louis print in the living room—a spray of colors—next to a filigree lamp with a Victorian lampshade. In the dining room, a series of Daumier prints, with their strange cartoon figures and lines of incomprehensible French underneath: *Ça n'est q'un affreux mannequin! J'ai cru que c'était mon mari!*

My father's was a life of the mind, and his sense of duty as a parent was to introduce his children to that life. Me especially. By the time I was ten, I had attended several concerts at Carnegie Hall with my father and was reading Emily Dickinson along with my Nancy Drew.

My mother's idea of parenting could not have been more different. If my father lived a life of the mind, my mother's life was entirely of the body. She was a visiting nurse, and went off to work each morning in her blue uniform while my father stayed home, hunched over his typewriter. At dinner, she liked to talk, not without some relish, about the things she'd witnessed during the day—the man with maggots in his wound, the bat bite that had turned gangrenous. And every weekend, while my father read or listened to Bach, my mother whisked my brother and me out the door for exercise. During the winter it was sledding at the aqueduct or skating on Mohansic Lake, our feet turning slowly numb. In summer it was hiking in all kinds of weather. I was never a physical child, and although my mother always tried to instill in me the pleasures of exercise, I never took to them. I wanted the life my father lived.

It was a romance. My father was a remote man, able to sit through an entire meal without saying a word, but that only made the challenge more interesting, and his interest more rewarding. The front of the desk in my father's large study was littered with gifts from me. There was the wooden box that I built on the back porch, sawing the wood, painting the sides, fitting in paper panels on which I had copied out, in colored ink, Emily Dickinson poems. *Hope is a thing with feathers* . . . Or there was the figure I made of him, carved out of a block of wax. It showed him in one of his favorite poses—a silly walk from Monty Python. Not a likeness exactly, but it did stand on one foot.

Then there were the plays; we put them on in the family room, my brother and my best—and only—friend Susan and I. A sheet on a string hung between two square pillars served as a curtain. I wrote the dialogue, directed, gave myself the best parts. For "Baby Cheese," a retelling of the Christmas story, I was the Virgin Mary. I remember the Phisohex bottle filled with water that I used for the tears I wanted running down my face. And I remember turning and seeing my parents' faces, both of them crying—a sight that mystified me at first, then filled me with satisfaction.

Fourth grade was my heyday. I was Mrs. Stark's favorite. "Kay-dee," she called me. I was summoned to the front of the room again and again to bask in her approval, serve as an example. I had written a brilliant essay. I had gotten to level purple in the SRAs. At that age I noticed, but did not care, that I was unpopular. I was not invited to birthday parties, and once, at my own birthday party, Annie Malan tricked me by giving me what I thought was Juicy Fruit, but was really garlic gum. Of course, their laughter stung a little, but I had the attention of my parents and my teachers. That was what mattered.

Then came middle school. I continued to get good marks, to be the best speller and the first to raise her hand in class, but, in a way I could not understand, I became increasingly invisible. For three years I sat alone at lunch, chewing dutifully on the fruit leather my mother had packed for me because it was healthier than Frito's corn chips. For three years, I walked home from school alone, feeling the eyes of my classmates look through me as the afternoon school buses passed.

The house was a refuge then. When I opened the heavy front door and stepped inside, things were comfortable again—I had a place, and my father was there to rescue me. He had now, in addition to his study downstairs, an upstairs study, with sloping, mustard-colored walls. He'd found some gold-backed mirrors in an antique shop. Look into one and you'd see yourself reflected in golden light.

I would come home from school, lie on the beige rug in the circle of light made by the floor lamp beside his armchair, and he would read to me. First, *Alice in Wonderland*, then *Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Great Expectations*. For *Alice in Wonderland*, he did all the voices: the bored caterpillar, the screeching queen, the lugubrious Mock Turtle. He would get to an especially funny line: "*And to say I eat what I like,*" said the Dormouse indignantly, "*is not at all the same thing as to say I like what I eat*" and he'd stop. We would grin at each other and I felt I was rising in the air.

It was because of him that in sixth grade, when everyone in the class had to memorize a poem and recite it out loud, I chose Lewis Carroll's "Father William." Other girls selected earnest, flowery poems by Joyce Kilmer and Robert Louis Stevenson. I stood planted at the front of the room, a half-smile on my face, and recited: "*Your hair has become very white—And yet you incessantly stand on your head—Do you think, at your age, it is right?*"

Nobody got it—not the teacher, or the prim girls who went before me, or any of the other kids. But I imagined my father sitting at the back of the class winking back at me. That was enough.

IT ENDED SUDDENLY. I was sixteen. It was summer. My parents and brother had been on vacation out west; I was allowed to stay home alone. When they returned, the door to my father's van opened and my mother fell out, then staggered across the lawn. "Kate," she called, arms out. "Kate you have to help me. Your father wants a divorce."

The summer my father left, my mother had a nervous breakdown. She would come down to the kitchen in the morning, sit at the breakfast table, and stare into the air in front of her. "Toast?" I'd offer. "Tea? Scrambled egg?" She'd look at me blankly. Everything made her cry—

a dead mouse, a dollar bill left in a pocket and put through the wash by mistake. Long, hard sobs raised her rib cage up and slammed it down again. But when I reached for her, she pushed me away.

Over the next years, I was forced to realize, slowly and painfully, that my parents had abandoned me. My mother moved away when I was still in college. She got a job with the Indian Health Service and drove off to New Mexico with her new boyfriend, waving gaily at me as if her grand adventure were mine as well.

By that time my father had remarried and moved to the Hamptons. Physically, he wasn't as far away as she was, but emotionally, he was gone. He was very happy in his new life—the parties, the new friends, all of them artists and editors and writers. I would visit him at his house and he would be glad to see me, throwing an arm jovially around my shoulders while introducing me to some new poet—but he never had time to talk.

My disappointment exploded when I was about twenty-two. I wrote him a letter, listing his mistakes and moments of neglect, telling him I had given up on him. His reply came a week later, a single sentence typed on a blank sheet of paper: *I don't want to see you or hear from you for a long time to come.*

THE YEAR I GRADUATED from college, 1983, was the year the loss of my family really hit me. I moved back to New York City, and I couldn't stop shouting at people. Not out loud, but in my head, I shouted at people who weren't there—my mother, my father, and, by extension, anyone who had ever wronged me. I would walk by homeless people on the street, hearing them shout into the air, and I would know how little separation there was between us.

In my apartment, in Spanish Harlem, I woke up each night at three or four a.m. and I could never fall back to sleep. At work I wept without warning, standing over the copy machine or hunched over in a stall in the bathroom, trying to stifle my sobs. I was, as they say, troubled.

And I couldn't stop dreaming. Every night, I returned to the Shrub Oak house. I drifted through the living room, past the Morris Louis print, that fountain of colors. I brushed past the olive-green rug, the low

orange couch, the flowered drapes—everywhere, a golden light. It was all the same—the filigreed lamp and the coffee table and the titles of the books. Exactly the way I remembered it, the way I wanted it to be. Having lost so much, I could not give this up. It was home.

SLOWLY, MY LIFE CHANGED. At thirty-five, I got married. At forty, I gave birth to a son, Eli. Then, at forty-three, I moved back to Shrub Oak with my husband and son. We bought at the height of the housing bubble—you had to bid on a house the day you saw it if you wanted it, and my husband wanted this one, with the little stream out back, and the price we could just eke out. If I had misgivings about moving to the suburbs—and this suburb in particular—they were soothed when I saw how brisk the market was. If I didn't like it, we could always sell.

But when I found myself living here again, I saw how vulnerable I really was. Driving past my old house to the supermarket, I had to sing to keep my mind occupied. *Don't think about it*, I told myself when I crossed the library parking lot to my car, trying not to let my eyes stray across the street. *Don't look.*

In the summer of 2005, I told my husband that I couldn't stay here. We put our house on the market, but all through the spring and summer nothing happened. The housing bubble had burst. I was stuck.

So I did what I always do in a crisis: I went back to therapy. How humiliating to sit there, week after week, a person who *cannot solve her own problems*. How awkward to tell my story over and over, my sad, sad story.

I remember rebelling one day. "What's the point of this?" I burst out. "Why are we going over this again? I've told this story hundreds of times! What good does it do?" My therapist was an older woman with short gray-and-black hair who spoke with a distinct New York accent, one of the reasons I trusted her.

"That's okay," she said calmly. "Just keep telling it. Keep telling the story until you get bored."

That's one way to put it: I might get tired of my own tragedy.

Five years passed, but I didn't get bored. Something else happened. In its many retellings, the story changed. When I dream now, floating

toward the ceiling in the golden light of the things I love, I realize I am visiting the father I wish for, not the father who left. When I tell the story this way, I don't have to be a grieving daughter abandoned because she wasn't lovable enough.

"Remember, you are everyone in the dream," my father used to tell me when I was young. The book my father was writing then was about psychiatry, and he read constantly—Freud, Jung, R.D. Laing. I would relate some nightmare to him, about losing my kitten or about King Kong chasing me, and he would say this with a knowing grin, a glint of pleasure in his eyes. My father always loved unsettling truths:

*You are everyone in the dream.*

*You are everyone in the dream house.*

*Everyone and everything.*

*The books on the shelves.*

*The Daumiers.*

*The golden light.*

When we moved to Shrub Oak, Eli was in nursery school. He's a sixth grader now, and I've gotten used to the idea that, like it or not, I am here to stay for years to come.

Eli's favorite place in Shrub Oak is Abbott's Frozen Custard, only two doors down from the house where I used to live. Once it opens each year, in May, we walk down there almost every day to get ice cream. I've stopped dreaming so much about the old house, and it isn't as painful to walk past it. On our way to Abbott's, I sometimes stop in front of it and point things out to Eli—the windows of my old bedroom, or the view I used to like from behind the front window, looking over at the library and the pine trees beyond.

Eli listens for a moment, but he usually pulls away before I'm finished. He's not like I was: adult-oriented, eager to please. There's no memory house waiting for him here. He doesn't walk in the shadow of his own story.

We go to Abbott's and Eli orders his favorite, a black-and-white milkshake. We sit on the cement steps while he sips it, and then we

head back. We pass my old house again, but I don't linger. I keep walking—past Dane Street and Frost Lane, and the old elementary school, where Mrs. Stark used to call me to the front of the room. I pass the dentist's office at Sunnyside Avenue, turn the corner, and keep walking.

After all, I'm over fifty now and I have a house of my own. ◇