

A House is a Thing You Run From

It was the epitome of human failure, that little pink house on the corner of Pine and Lemon. It sat there in shambles, its pink paint like tears of surrender and its previously green shutters dull as the Mississippi winter sky. It seemed to exist halfheartedly, its very foundation conducting an internal debate each day about whether or not it should just collapse. The only thing vibrant about the house was the bright green mold that crept up the back of the house like a warning to those thinking of entering.

Its outside only told part of the story, though; it had a history. 17 years ago in 2004, it was foreclosed by the bank, and the new buyers, the Groves family, had warily walked in to find an array of mismatching objects: a clothes-less baby doll, several toy trucks that surely came from a McDonald's Happy Meal, rusted kitchen utensils, small coins, and an opened letter.

Something about the doll made Mr. Groves feel sad. Had the family been in such a rush to go that the baby doll was simply forgotten? Did they have a limit on what they could fit in the rusty old truck that they'd seen? Had the girl long outgrown such toys and the adult that the girl had grown into had found it in an old childhood basket?

"A new doll!" exclaimed the older child, a 7 year old girl. She wasn't picky about her dolls' appearances. The missing eye just added character, and the girl was already daydreaming scenarios in her next game of house. She'd tell her friends that the baby had been in a horrible accident.

"You don't know where that's been," warned her mother. The girl put it down but looked at it from the corner of her eye.

Perhaps the stray letter was the most heartbreaking of all— it had come from Bolivar County Jail.

The date was written on the top of the letter: August 15th, 2004.

DEAR CAROLYNN,

I GOT BOTH OF YOUR LETTERS FRIDAY. I HOPE THAT YOU HAVE A BETTER WEEK. I WONT TRY AND TELL YOU WHAT TO DO. BUT YOU MIGHT HAVE TO GO TO THE HOUSE FOR A WHILE AND

FIND A JOB IN TUNICA SOMEWHERE. PAM MIGHT COME HELP YOU GET A JOB OUT AT ONE OF THE CASINO. MAMA MIGHT KNOW SOME JOBS IN TUNICA. WHEN I GET OUT WE WILL HAVE A LONG WEEKEND AND PLAN WHEN TO MOVE IF YOU HADN'T ALREADY MOVE. I THINK THAT I WOULD LIKE THE COAST. I HAVE THOUGHT ABOUT MAYBE OPENING UP ONE OF THOSE PLACES THAT CHANGES OIL AND LUBE ETC. YOU COULD WORK THE FRONT AND TAKE CARE OF THE BOOKS AND I COULD DO THE BACK. I CAN ALSO SHOW YOU HOW TO WORK THE BACK. THE KIDS COULD WORK THERE IN THE SUMMER. IT COULD BE A FAMILY TRADITION. I DON'T KNOW IF THERE IS ANY PROGRAM FOR PEOPLE THAT HAVE BEEN IN JAIL TO HELP THEM START OVER OR NOT. I WILL HAVE TO CHECK WITH IT. I GUESS I CAN CHECK WHEN I GET OUT. I DON'T KNOW WHERE TO LOOK BUT SOMEONE WILL KNOW. YOU MIGHT CAN CHECK ONE OF THESE DAYS. IT WILL BE A WHILE ANYWAYS. BUT WE CAN STILL PLAN. NOT MUCH GOING ON TODAY. THEY ARE WATCHING THE NEWS. THE COUNTY HAS VISITATION TODAY SO IT WILL BE LATE IF WE GET TO GO OUTSIDE. SEND ME A PICTURE. I DON'T HAVE ONE OF YOU FOR THE YEAR. I HAVE ONE OF THE KIDS. I HAVE WENT BLANK SO I WILL CLOSE. WRITE WHEN YOU CAN.

LOVE ALWAYS,

DADDY

The man tucked it in his pocket though he was not quite sure why. The desires were simple in the kind of way that was heartbreaking. He'd never seen such innocence emanate from a letter that was born in a facility full of the guilty. It was almost too much to bear. And then there was the crystal meth; the cops found that the tenants had a crystal meth laboratory in the woods behind the house, and remnants told the story. Crystal meth wasn't exactly the kind of drug that allowed you to hide your problems and hold up a 9-to-5; instead, it took over your life like an abusive partner, demanding more attention and space each day that came along. Paranoia was evident; the windows were boarded up, and the ones that didn't have boards were covered with black trash bags. Air vents were even taped over. The family ended up declaring bankruptcy, and the house became the bank's possession. That was when the Groves family came in. Only in Mississippi could you get 200 acres and a 4-bedroom house for seventy thousand dollars.

That house was keeping score. It was tallying all of the drugs that came in and out, all of the hurled curse words that stung when they hit the walls, and all of the abandoned dolls and letters. That house was wilting. That house was tired. It turned a weary eye to the world and counted every storm. Well, the Groves family moved in regardless. Moving out there meant that the kids couldn't go to the city school district anymore, so they withdrew them. Mrs. Groves painted the outside of the house a pastel pink color, covering up the dark stains on the white panels. They painted the solar system across the wall in the large back room and crafted a fake window in the kitchen, covering up any sadness that still lingered along the way. They scrubbed the illicit drugs and failure off the walls with education. The walls heard algebraic equations and morning stories and the laughter of children. They strengthened. They stood a little taller. It was the most wonderful detox of all time. It was a quiet 5 years with only a few intruders. There were jokes and memories and still the sadness that goes with coming-of-age and growing into one's skin. The Groves moved into the city district for the kids to return to school only to move back 3 years later and build a house on the land behind the pink house. The house was converted to a rental with a remarkably low monthly fee. A quirky family of 6 moved in and brought their Harry Potter wands and Star Wars posters with them. A single mom with a mischievous red-haired child and a Yorkie moved in. Finally, Dina and her wife moved in, marking the last tenants the house would ever see. The two lived quietly with their beloved conglomeration of rescue dogs. Dina worked the night shift at Walmart, and her wife was a manager at Home Depot. They paid their bills on time, if only a few days late, and thus were easily forgotten by the Groves. All was well; the summer was damp and scorching, the fall was crisp and breezy, the winter was grey and rainy, and the spring was magical and fleeting. The cycle repeated endlessly. The Groves kids went off to top 20 schools and studied to become engineers and doctors. It seemed like the little house had shown to be capable of dynamic character change after all. For a few years, it seemed proud, almost. But it began to decline in a slow, subtle manner—the kind that is

noticed much too late. And in early 2021, its tenants proved that a peaceful, nonchalant existence for the pink house on the corner of Pine and Lemon was just too good to be true.

June Groves was home for her gap year before medical school, and the entire Groves family was home often due to the COVID19 pandemic that had shut the United States down over the past year. They often took walks together down their road that ended near the pink house.

“She’s really tearing up the front porch,” commented June, gaping at the shredded pieces of wood that made up the porch steps. The heavy, frequent rain had begun to make it rot. They seemed as if they would collapse at any moment. The house was slouching like it was ashamed to be looked at.

“She doesn’t value it,” said Mrs. Groves. She shook her head.

“She ties her dog to that porch,” said Mr. Groves. “Over time he’s just pulled and pulled, and it was more than the house could take.”

Dina had been living at the house for quite a few years, and yet her life was a mystery to the Groves. Her personal quirks and habits weren't a concern to the Groves. But toward the end of 2020, a pattern was emerging: days would pass, and the Groves wouldn't see her car in the driveway. Her dogs never seemed to be outside, but they couldn't possibly be staying in the house while she was gone— not for days at a time. Something was not right.

“I heard some weak barking and loud scratching up there,” Mr. Groves speculated, taking a sip of his nightly coffee. He had been trimming some bushes around the house that day.

“Well, we know she’s not checking on those dogs,” Mrs. Groves responded. “She never comes by the house anymore. I haven’t seen her car. Have you?” She gestured toward June, who shook her head.

“We oughta keep an eye out,” said Mr. Groves.

“Do you think they’re hungry?” June asked.

“If she’s not coming to check on them, then yes,” said Mrs. Groves, sighing.

“Surely she’s checking on them.”

“I haven’t seen Brody outside in a while,” said Mrs. Groves about the friendly chestnut-colored boxer that they’d come to know over the years.

The conversations went a lot like that the next few days. Were the dogs okay? Was she feeding them? What *was* Dina doing? The repetitiveness became frustrating and then plain depressing. There was really nothing they could do, and so eventually the conversation turned to more important matters. One weekday, June sensed some tension in the air as soon as she stepped foot in the door coming home from work.

“Is everything okay?” she asked, wondering if she was overthinking it all.

“I found Brody,” Mr. Groves said quietly.

“What do you mean, you found him?” said June, her eyes wide.

“You’re never going to believe this,” Mrs. Groves said. She had her hand on her forehead and a depressed look on her face.

“What?” June’s heart sunk. She was familiar with the tone in her mother’s voice.

“It’s Brody.” Her dad put his head down.

“Brody?”

“Dina’s dog, Brody,” said Mrs. Groves. “Dad found him in the backyard in a plastic bag, dead.”

“She didn’t even put him in the bag fully,” said Mrs. Groves, horrified. “It was like she had starved him, realized what she had done, and hidden it as quickly as she could.”

“No,” argued Mr. Groves. “She loved her dogs. She wouldn’t have done that. Is it possible that she had him out with her and he died somehow when she was at work and she didn’t know what to do with his body?”

“She didn’t bring him with her,” Mrs. Groves disagreed. “She is supposedly working some job up near Memphis.”

“So do you think there are more starving dogs inside?” June asked, sick to her stomach at the thought.

“I wouldn’t doubt it,” said Mrs. Groves.

“Can’t we go in there?” June asked, desperate. “Don’t you have a key? We could feed them if we know they are starving.”

“We can’t really go in,” said Mr. Groves. “It’s her house. But I told her in September that she had to move out in January, and it’s December 29th. We’ll find out soon enough.”

Mrs. Groves texted Dina, who hadn't responded to texts in days:

Hi Dina. When do you think you'll be moved out by?

Hi Dina. The animal shelter would take any of your dogs that you are unable to take care of. I know how much you love them.

Dina, we are going to call the sheriff to come get the dogs if you are unable to get them. I just wanted to let you know.

“I just can’t believe she wouldn't respond at all knowing that we might be calling the sheriff,” said June.

“I know.”

“If she doesn't respond, it’s not real,” said Mr. Groves. “If she doesn't acknowledge it, then it can’t be real. It’s all denial.” He shook his head.

The days passed, and it started to become more apparent that the interior of the house boasted a new kind of horror, one that the Groves family never wanted to see. As soon as the family worked up the courage and stepped on the front porch, the smell was there. It was an awful, sickening smell, one that made your breakfast turn over in your stomach and made you not want to eat for weeks. It was some kind of mixture of rotting animal, animal waste, and death. It smelled like nothing had been alive in that house for a long, long time. Thankfully, face masks were in high supply due to the pandemic, so the Groves returned to their car to layer the masks in preparation for what was to come. When they opened the door, they braced themselves for the possibility of finding dead or starving animals.

The house was dark and damp, and the floor was completely covered with a thick layer of dirt and dog feces. It was impossible to walk through without getting it on your shoes. It was also impossible to get the smell off of any items that had been in that house, they later realized. There were massive cobwebs that crept along the walls and formed thick bundles in the corners. The back room was the most terrifying, though; it was completely filled with dog cages. There were about ten of them, and they were stacked up on top of one another, leaving the viewer only to imagine what kind of special hell those animals had been through.

Dina had moved out just a few days ago, and it was unclear whether she had taken any items with her at all. She left her computer, TVs, and half-empty bottles of alcohol behind.

The Groves family had made up their mind; the house would have to be destroyed. The house was cursed, they decided. The first person ever to live in that house had a crystal meth lab in the backyard. They, too, left a mess behind. They finally realized that the house was just not cut out for a peaceful existence.

“How did she live like this?” Mrs. Groves kept asking,

“She’s a sterile processing technician at the hospital,” June kept repeating, “a sterile processing technician.”

“She’s likely been abused herself,” said Mr. Groves, always with the insight that comes from a job that requires one to study human nature again and again. “But why did she leave it all behind?”

And then there was another letter. In fact, there were multiple letters in the form of birthday cards. There was an entire wedding album left behind, complete with pictures and vows. A vinyl with cheap golden rims that seemed to hold songs from the wedding day was found buried under a mountain of laundry. And lastly, in a small box sat what was mostly definitely two wedding rings. She left it all behind. It was as if she felt that abandoning her material belongings would free her from the chaos of her life. This utter lack of sentimentality seemed to suggest that the chaos of her life was truly unbearable.

The Groves set everything out on the curb: the laundry machine, the washing machine, computers, TVs, old clothes, picture frames, and even the 20 half-empty liquor bottles. It was all gone within days.

“Who took the alcohol?” June asked, aghast but laughing.

“In the middle of a pandemic?” June asked again. “They took used bottles of liquor?”

They all laughed. It was the first moment of comedic relief all weekend— well, other than the inevitable: “I guess you could say this is a pretty shitty situation” and “how are we going to get all of the crap out of here?”

The starving dog appeared on day 3. It looked like a chihuahua or miniature pinscher, and it sat on the front porch of the house with a devastating sort of accomplishment. It tried to defend its property with all of its might when the Groves pulled up; it barked and even howled, warning them that they were trespassing.

“Yep, that’s that dog’s house,” Mr. Groves said, grimacing.

“Aren’t we going to feed it?” asked June. Although the dog’s fur was dark, she could see the ribs protruding when the sunlight hit it. It couldn't have been more than ten pounds.

“If we feed it, there’s no going back,” said Mr. Groves.

“We can’t really call the shelter either,” said Mrs. Groves. “And have them come out here and get involved with this complicated mess. We’d have to tell them about Dina and how she possibly starved it.”

And so they began feeding the dog. The first day, the dog was hesitant but still took the food from them. The second day, the dog had rapidly declined, it seemed, because it couldn't even move from the thick comforter that Mrs. Groves had placed on the front porch. It was just lying on its stomach, head between its paws, sniffing weakly and willing itself to move. The dog didn't even have enough energy to move toward the food or water bowl. June held the food bowl right up to the dog’s mouth, and it began to eat so fast that June was afraid it might choke.

It was a miracle that the dog survived long enough to find its way back. Dina had left 4 days ago, and the dog had just now shown up. That meant that she dropped the dog far enough away that it took 4 days to walk back. It was an incredible tiny dog and had managed to avoid getting hurt by other dogs, attacked by coyotes, and hit by cars. It was a survivor. How did this tiny creature defy all of the odds stacked up against her?

“At least something good came out of the house,” June said, watching the little dog settle in to the doll-sized dog bed they had bought from the Dollar Store.

And then it happened. Mr. Groves fulfilled his childhood dream of knocking a building down with a bulldozer. It went down too easily; its walls sighed and gave in too eagerly and the glass melted too quickly. The sound that it made when it fell down was so minimal that it was depressing. The matches were thrown into the pile of boards, glass, and waste. And then it happened: what was left of the house went up in flames. June had never seen glass burn like that before, and she wanted to look away. Something didn't seem natural about it. A controlled fire was possible in a rainy, humid place like Mississippi, but it still seemed like the forrest would burst into flames at any moment, dragging living trees and animals along with it. That house was selfish, and June Groves thought that it wouldn't have been surprising if it wanted to make something suffer like it had. It had been keeping score, and it had run out of place on the walls for tally marks. Now the walls were just ashes in the ground.

The first blade of grass on the house site was almost a miracle. Was it possible that anything could grow from all of the chaos? Was it possible that life could really spring out from the ground that had held failure up for so long? But it seems that it was. The grass grew a little more day by day until bunches of wildflowers and dandelions grew. The Groves scattered sunflower seeds and planted pear and apple trees. At night, it became a beautiful star-gazing location. The house was gone. But now a sunflower field sat in its place. A whole field of sunflowers, with possibility of bringing forth life and

new beginnings, sat in the place of the old pink house. The little dog danced as the sunflowers moved in the wind and seemed jubilant to have overcome the trauma she faced. The possibility of life on that plot of land was enough. It was something the sun deemed worth shining on.