

Courage

I used to drive back to my hometown and watch my old house from the street. I would park at the end of the road after dark and walk past the Harrisons', the Gordan's, the Oates', until I was only a few doors down, hidden behind a hedge. One night I saw their faces, Nonna and Pop, through a gap in the curtain. Could they know the boy they had raised as their own was now watching them as an unrecognizable grown man?

Every night I would ask for the courage to knock on the door, every night I'd turn and drive away again, driven by this feeling, and this fear: *Must go back to the house and see them. Must see the house. Must sit with them, and hear their stories, get their side of things, before it's too late.*

And then, one evening, driving to sit outside our old house, I drove past Nonna and Pop in the park. I pulled over and went to them. They were in the gazebo, leaning on the railing watching the sunset. I walked up behind them and called their names. They turned, laughing in surprise. I smiled and joined them on the railing. The sky was deep blue and orange, small dark clouds moving over the hills. It was cold suddenly, and the park smelled of hard earth and dry leaves.

That night I stayed in my old home for the first time since I left thirteen years ago. Long after they had closed their bedroom door, I lay on my back in my old bed listening to the house. I wished for some smell or noise to settle into my heart so I might repossess it: a scent, a movement of the curtain, a creak of the radiator – I opened my arms so the past might root itself inside my chest, but it refused, and I lay there empty.

I woke up early smelling clean sheets. They were asleep. I walked downstairs. The boiler turned on, the floor vibrated, and a heater cracked. I pulled back a drape and saw blue clouds and raindrops. I watched the street get lighter until I could see the telephone wires, wondering, *how did I let us grow so distant?* I know they wondered the same way.

I heard them moving around upstairs. I let the curtain fall over the window and walked silently across the carpet to the dining room. They would want to hear my stories, sit with me, hear my side of things, want to know things about me that I didn't know myself.

As footsteps crossed the ceiling, I walked through the dining room to wait in the kitchen so I could be holding something useful in my hands when Nonna and Pop came in. In the kitchen I found my coat, and my boots.

And now the stairs were creaking, and my boots were on, and then I bent down to tie them, our old scars were in the kitchen with me, in the drapes, under the sink. *Must go back to the house. Must see the house. Must sit with them and hear their stories. Hear their side of things.*