

The House My Father Built

Written by Robert Worthy III

The house seemed so quiet now. A mausoleum for bad memories my mother and I mourned divergently. Mother had an affinity to romance what she called and considered, the better days. I believe she thought that if she simply mentioned and kept reminiscing about the few times the three of us smiled, then maybe I would accept *that* as the past we once lived. She focused on repetition. A personalized propaganda. She enjoyed reading me her edited version of my book of life, but what she constantly forgets is that like her, I too have the original manuscript. And I hated her so much for her forced ignorance that over the years, it has morphed into pure jealousy. I angrily envied how unaffected she seemed. How... unchanged. A hereditary trait she undeniably kept for herself. Even more so, I resented myself for retaining enough love for her to still come to her on this day. *This* day. Which has just become an anniversary for shared silence.

I take a dry gulp as I turn my key and the engine on my truck mumbles quiet. I shake my head a little as I remember the first time I drove it up here to see my mom and she proclaimed it was a car only a man should drive. A notion that could have easily been swayed if I did nothing more than have it painted pink. She was so black and white when it came to gender roles. She always wanted me to be this girly girl. She made concentrated efforts to keep me in dresses and little shoes with buckles. I don't think I wore pants until I was old enough to buy them myself.

Reminiscing is supposed to be romantic. I take two or three more trumpet blowing breaths while I calculate how I want to execute this visit. I close my eyes for a few moments. Wind pours through my window. There's something so cleansing about feeling the breeze wash over your face. I can feel it on my ears now as well. I slid my hand down the back of my head under the lobe. I forgot about how short my hair was now. I'm sure she'd probably have something derogatory to say about it, but its too comfortable and low maintenance for her opinion to have swayed me. To my mother, looking comfortable and low maintenance was synonymous with lesbianism. I've been thinking about dying it

black, this blonde is too conspicuous. For some reason it makes me feel sexualized every time I walk into a courtroom. Stenographers need not be noticed. Definitely something for me to think about on a later date. Now is the time for precise execution of the game plan.

Ok. I'm just going to cautiously walk through this home as if I were an open house observer: careful not to touch things belonging to the current resident. And even though I grew up here I don't feel that this is awkward behavior. I don't want anything to do with the history of this house and I fear that if I were to rub my hand across any item, its turbulent autobiography would be rewritten onto my mind with the heated pressure of a tattoo needle. Tattoos I want removed, not refreshed.

I stepped out the driveway and felt the same disgust that I always feel when I look at my house. I smelled and quickly hurdled a small clump of fresh poop. Probably from one of them cute little tiny dogs. Hmph, even the animals knew where the shit belonged. All the other people who lived on this street had houses that were made over or at least had some form of renovation, but not mine. I could hold an old picture of it in front of my eyes, then move it away and not even notice a difference. It would be as if I only blinked for a second longer. So. Fucking. Depressing. Ironically, the place appeared to have no discernible personality at all. It was an unflattering two stories accompanied by dusty windows with bars on the outside. Undoubtedly a joke for the neighbors that never got old. Maybe those bars were there to keep the monsters *inside*.

There was a red brick stoop consisting of three steps that ran away from the front door which was armed with a wood railing that would make sandpaper cringe before rubbing against. The driveway led to a side exit that would take you either to the kitchen upstairs, or down into a basement. *The* basement. I'm not totally sure if that place held my first clear memory, but unquestionably my, first unforgettable event.

The basement didn't comprise of much more than a pool table, a green leather love seat that I don't recall ever not having that gray duck tape layered over the left arm, an exposed boiler that Adam would drunkenly burn himself leaning against and for some odd reason, a big chest freezer right next to it. Adams father used to use it to keep a

freshly hunted buck frozen until he could sell it or so I was told. All in all, a weak attempt at man-cave, but one I believe never disappointed Adam.

Adam was a man who my mother used to say was a "lady killer" when they met. She had a rehearsed way of describing him that I knew verbatim. Always clutching her hands, then lying her head against them before waxing poetic, "...The softest green eyes, a dimple in his right cheek that you could just drown in and perfectly coiffed brown hair that *never* thinned." She always got a little extra excited towards the end and emphasized the never. I always giggled because I didn't know what coiffed meant, I just thought it sounded funny.

One day I sat on the love seat in one of my single colored Lisa Simpson dresses of which I had every color of the same. It was a hot summer day so the backs of my calves would stick to the chair a little. Adjacent to me Adam sat confidently wearing his blue uniform pants on the edge of the pool table smiling at me like he knew all of life's secrets. I couldn't have been any more than nine at the time. An intuitive apprehension I always had as a child.

"Daddy, how come mommy never gets to play with us down in your den," I asked with my hands folded and little legs kicking.

"That's because mommies not here, sweetie. You know if she was I would be that much more happier because we could have that... much... more... fun," he said while playfully tapping the tip of my nose. I winced my way to a smile. Adam tilted his head back looking slightly troubled.

"You don't like to play with just daddy? What, Daddy's no fun???"

"Nooooo, daddy." I giggled as to not disappoint him. "It's just...I kinda wish mommy was here." This I said looking off to the side with my head in my shoulder.

"You know what," he asked still grinning. "I wish mommy was here too. But sometimes we have to have just daddy and Chrissy time, right?" With wide eyes I just stared at him. For the first time I couldn't just say what he wanted to hear. What he needed to hear. "You know daddy loves you right sweetheart?" Adam sat down next to me on the love seat and we could hear the leather screech slightly. He put his hand on the tip of my spine and all

my joints tightened. All the attention I once naively welcomed was all at once now paralyzing me. "...And you know daddy would never ever do anything to hurt his little Chrissy, right," he said as he looked left and right with a feigned paranoia. I stood up like a soldier at attention but I did not face him. Yet, I could still see him in my peripheral. Feet frozen with anxious toes. In my mind I thought I was running away.

"Come on now, baby girl, you know daddy is sick and this makes him feel better." I could see and hear him unzipping his pants. I stared at the ground. Then I took one step forward honestly thinking it was many. I could smell that weird wet rubbery smell. "I don't want to do it today, I want mommy. I was still not looking at him. He grabbed my hand slowly a finger at a time and pulled me close to him. Still holding my hand he said, "I know you want mommy, sweetie, but you don't want daddy to be sick do you?"

"No..."

"So come on, and when we're finished, we can go get some ice cream," he said sensing victory. I was still ogling the ground when I said, "Some for mommy too?"

"Of course sweetie, some for mommy too." Mission accomplished.

My mission was to get inside this house so I could get out of it. In and out. In and out. This having the equally probable success that it does at the DMV. And though the side door would be a quicker route to my mother, who I usually always see sitting in the kitchen, I don't think I'll be taking that way. Not for all the ice cream in the world. The front exit was a white screen door with the screen being just a head and shoulder type space located on the upper half of the door. The bottom of the screen had a hole in it right about the doorknob. I work my way assertively up the brick steps and open the screen door. I pause upon reaching the second wooden door with the scratched brass handle. I take a couple more Lamaze breaths as I lean against the second door. I tightly blink back a little moisture forming in my eyes. Then I open the door and walk in.

Carpet-less steps converge on you as soon as you open the door. A barefoot walker's nightmare. Easy to slip or get pricked on while running up or down them. I stared up at

that second floor. Atop these stairs stood an uninviting darkness that loomed on even the brightest of days. But I'm not going up there. To the left of the stairs was the living room. Straight ahead was a thin corridor that led to the kitchen in the back of the house. On the right there was a longer hall that led to a small bathroom and another room. My bedroom was located at the end of the hall on the first floor. How impersonal. A little girl should not have to go upstairs to tell her parents she's scared of the boogeyman in the closet. Hmph. First floor. Another convenient escape for him.

For a long time I thought my tribulations on the first floor were specific to me. But I believe it was in my 11th year that Adam shamelessly lost his "tact".

The house was never truly hushed. Every strong wind would sneak through my evening windows like a cat burglar it seemed, just to whistle menacing whispers into my ears and then steal away. I could hear every thirsty hinge slightly creak. A motley crew of ghosts and deformed animals I would imagine skulking the first floor not finding me because I lay under my comforter of invisibility.

Some nights I would sleep with my mother and Adam if I felt too scared or lonely. Always tightly wrapped in my mother's arms. One night A demon clanged against my window or a tree branch was blown against it, and I needed that packaging. I went up those unforgivingly cold stairs to avoid that miserable lower level of the house. Walking towards my parent's bedroom I heard the sound of something crashing to the ground. I stopped at first. Then I crept toward the door which was wide open. I stood slightly in front of it but could not go in. It was as if a force field was present that only I could see.

My mother was in the corner of the room clutching in pain at her lower back awkwardly with one arm. She looked like one of those way too aloof store mannequins at a dress shop. The mirror that hung on the back of the closet was cracked and blood spotted. My mother's empty jewelry box laid open on the floor. This snapshot alone was enough to traumatize me. I tried to yell out but no sound escaped me. My father charged at her and punched her in the stomach. Before she could fall to the ground he grabbed her up by her throat and stood her back up against the wall. "You think you're fucking funny, bitch?" He said this neither shouting nor whispering. I could only see one side of his face

and the one eye I could see was mashed shut. My mother tried to reply but her words were stifled. Just coughs and gasps. "Answer my fucking question you stupid cunt!" He let her go and she leaned to the side on the night table for support. She was determined to speak still in her weakened state.

Holding her throat she choked out while not looking in Adam's direction, "How could ya? How could ya do me like this? I done found, *cough*, I done found a rubber in your pants Adam. I found it in your ...God Damned work pants. So I figured I'd just a lay it on the nightstand right there so you wouldn't forget it next time ya left the house!" She said this all while still looking away from him appearing brave and terrified all at once. I myself still couldn't move.

My mother looks in the direction of the door and maybe right before or just as she could see that I was there, Adam punched her in her lower back. She fell slowly to her knees before curling over. Adam walked over to the table and smacked the condom off the stand.

"So I wouldn't forget??? Woman are you crazy?" he said walking around to the head of her body. "Huh? Are you fucking crazy?" Not realizing that his questions may appear rhetorical, and obviously offended, he kicks her in the ribs smiling with that dimple in all its tyrannical glory. Still not noticing me he says to her, "What'd you think, I would just come home and let this shit fucking slide. Huh?" She grabbed his legs trying to crawl to her knees. "Huh bitch? Get the hell offa me," he says while shoving her to the ground." See what you seem to have forgotten is, I ask the fucking questions around here. Don't worry about what the fuck I do when I leave this house. You sit around here on your ass all day complaining about being sick.....Bitch, you been sick for what seems like fucking months. I told you to go to the fucking hospital or something, but I see your lazy ass couldn't even get up to do that. But you got time to go through my fucking pants. You know what, I left some fucking skittles in my jacket pocket the other day, did you find those? Since you a fucking detective and shit now?"

He hovered over her. She was still on the floor curled up like fried shrimp. After a couple of seconds of her just lying there silently, he picked her up and sat her on the edge

of the bed. Just then he looked at the door and saw me. He ran over to me and picked me up into his arms unaware of how much I had seen or if I had seen anything at all.

"Is mommy ok, Daddy," was all I could release. He patted my back and carried me downstairs repeating how sick Mommy was and how much rest she needed.

Before then I never knew Adam to be violent so it all seemed like a bad dream. And for a long time I really believed that my mother was truly sick. But I know now that she would fake being ill a lot of the time so my father would be easier on her. She had a defense plan. I didn't. Soon after, we discovered that she really was sick. She had Dilated Cardiomyopathy, which is a condition where the heart enlarges. I thought it was a blessing since after that, Adam knew he couldn't get her too worked up or it could be a serious issue.- Even Better defense plan.

I walked to the left into the living room straight to the old cherrywood credenza. There were all types of terrible knick-knacks on that thing. There was one green flowerless single stem holding vase on the right edge ready to join its brothers. It was the soul survivor of a set of four, two of which met their doom with a crashing of my mother's back against the credenza's once proud foundation. The third I swiped playfully running from Adam one summer. There were broken picture frames of a smiling family from a time I can't remember. People I could vaguely recognize with that expression. Except maybe for Adam. His smile stayed with me. Under the first shelf was a drawer my father used to keep a pistol in to "protect y'all from them savages out there," he used to say. There was also a snow globe that my father threw at her too many times to recollect. Inside the globe was a miniscule igloo and an Eskimo family sitting around a tiny fire next to it. This trinket still in tact only because of my father's accuracy. He never missed. Usually only heaving it at her breasts and stomach. Come to think of it, he missed once when she was running out the front exit and hit the bottom of the screen on the white door.

Oddly enough, as the months would go by with me and my mother not so secretly trading horrible experiences, she would appear completely unaffected on what I labeled the "down times."

What made Adam so scary was the content of those down times. He would come in the kitchen while my mother cooked and kiss her on the back of the neck. I would be sitting there reading aloud to her and he would ask me "Isn't mommy the best?" And with an anticipatory giggle I would always respond "y..y..yes." Then, poking my belly, he would say "And who's the second best"? And then, well...what difference does it make?

There was this jagged hole in the wall that split between the hall and the corridor to the kitchen that almost brought a smile to my face. For all her flaws my mother did shoot at the bastard once. I think that it was the first time she realized, well maybe not realized, but was 100% sure that my father was doing something to me. I didn't see it happen but I heard it. Just one shot that woke me out of my sleep. I didn't get out of my bed but sat up with my hands clasped together, praying she had killed him. Then I didn't hear anything but the murmur of my mother's voice for a short while. Then a loud thud. Adam never touched me again.

Now fifteen years to the day, I hazily see her sitting alone in a daze at the kitchen table. A table that for fifteen years has been one tipsy flare-up at dinner by Adam from being firewood or even worse, more pages for my mother to rewrite the past on. The same stained flower print tablecloth covered a crack that split two thirds of the table. The same exact one. With an empty napkin holder I can't ever remember having any napkins within its center. I stood by the refrigerator looking at all the childhood pictures of myself we magneted to the door like campaign buttons in support of my own presidency. On the freezer door there were single consonants that could spell no words and some magnets with no covering at all that looked like black eyes that never healed. She held in her hand this picture of the three of us that we took the summer before it all began. It was a picture we took right after church. I remember Adam telling one of the deacons to "Get a picture of me with my angels."

The years have been cruel to my mother. Her face appeared to retain a permanent grimace and various strands of her blond hair were either thinning or turning white. She sat there in a once white robe that no longer had a belt. Her legs were crossed and the

elevated leg rocked slowly. The flip-flop she had on was so worn out that it looked like it was a part of her foot, just scabbed. It seemed like every time I came here she would be randomly massaging an area of her body. Newly wincing at old bruises. Today it was her right shoulder. She didn't look at me. She never really did. I never stayed long. Just usually came to make sure.

"I remember," she said weakly, barely moving her mouth, if at all, smiling and now rubbing a thumb across the picture she held. "...I remember when your father first got that silly camera." Now smiling more effortlessly, she said "He'd just take pictures of you doin any ol thang." Her leg kicked faster and she rocked in her chair with increasing enthusiasm." Whether you was riding that bike or just sitting in here with me coloring in one of them books you had." She grabbed the photo with both hands and held it up higher. " Just flash, flash, flash, flash, flashing that thang, and just grinning with that big ol grin he had." She bowed into a giggle. "Oh he loved that camera."

Before I even realized I was lunging at her. I slapped at the picture and she dropped it face down on the floor. Too angry to even let tears form. "What's wrong with you? Why do you do this to yourself every year" I screamed looking for no response. "Sitting in the dark listening to that same song all night. And for what? He's not coming back. You act like he was this *saint*. As if--"

"Why Christina," she said calmly cutting me off, "Why you come here for?" Our eyes have yet to meet. "I aint ask you to come here. No, I most surely did not. In fact, I aint seen you in months. Aint heard word one from you since...an it aint like I can come to you! But you wanna come over here on *this* day and tell me," she gathered herself somewhat, "an me how I should feel about my husband?" She then looked me through my eyes. "About yo daddy? And don't even think bout that Adam mess you started doin when you was a teen an thought you was grown." She raises and places the picture back upright in the window. Never saw her reach down for it though. She then returned to her seat as we both share a opened-mouth silence.

Authentically sympathetic for whatever reason, I say, "I came," gulping to speak more confidently. "I came to see how you were doing." I then sat down diagonal from her at the

table. "I know how you are, even though I wish you didn't act like this cause I really don't understand how," I pause to tighten my jaw to maintain composure and then I just disappointingly shake my head. "Forget it, I don't know why I came, we never talked about him, and you're, *you're* gone." I placed my hands on the table to steady them. I can't understand why she has this nostalgic longing for times that she seemed to perceive as pleasant. "You cant even," I bring both lips into my mouth. "You can't even hear me."

Then nothing.

"Maybe," she looked down to the left and then straight ahead. "Maybe that the reason we aint neva spoke bout it," she wiped her mouth. "Didya ever just stop an think or ask yourself that.." she sat up and massaged her right thigh. "...WE aint neva spoke bout it cause was nuthin to be said bout it. Soon as I knew fo sho, I..."

Regretting even that minor aggression, she tenderly placed one of her hands on top of mine. Weightless. She looked at me while she spoke but now my head bowed. I closed my eyes. Her voice in my head. "Chrissy baby," I can see her fingers stroking the back of my hand rhythmically. "You think I don't," her hand stopped moving. "You think I didn't know, but that aint what it was." The fighting back of tears can be heard in her voice.

"Sometimes," she said methodically, "Sometimes you don't want to, or at least baby maybe you choose not to, believe thangs that you probably know are plainly true. Sometimes the truth just so heartbreaking that you'd rather pretend it don't even exist than cept it." I pulled my hands away. She winced as if a mouse trap snapped closed on her fingers. Tears began to sneak away from her eyes like painful memory refugees. "All these years, I wanted to say sorry to ya for so many years...an I," exhaling the rest of the sentence, "I couldn't do it. All these years I spent trying to get the thought outta my head, hoping you wouldn't bring it up. Hoping you wouldn't," she paused carefully choosing her next words like fruit at the market that would be soft enough for me to bite in my adolescence, "hoping you would," she looked away. "I've just been avoiding it baby. I didn't want to fuss with you and you just yell it out and make me face it head on. So I let..." she almost looks at me but decided against it, "...And I'm sorry."

Eager for her touch again, I placed my hands back on the table. She seemed to misinterpret this action. "Wait, lemme finish. Then you can leave, yell, spit, whatever you want but let me finish." I sense her hand covering mine once more. "I owe this to the both of us. You been hurting all these years I know, Chrissy, but I been here watching it over and over again every day. An I know he was no damned saint," she says trying not to sound vindictive. "I don't miss him," she says trying even harder. "I miss us." She rises from her seat and moves towards the stove. You could barely see her. "Before it all began. I miss the idea of the three of us, the idea of family. I miss what could've been. I miss what wasn't."

"How could you be so selfish," I say trying not to sound furious. "How could you leave me to handle things on my own? I needed you. Then. Now. Everything in between, I needed you. I'm so alone. So lost. Looking for answers to questions I can't ask. Looking for love that I never got from you." I come to my feet now. "That I could only get from you. Lowered expectations and still received weak substitutes, -for you. For *him*," I say pointing a sharp finger in the direction of my father's picture before continuing. "Not knowing what I'm supposed to love. Who I'm supposed to love. "Our eyes meet. "Just wondering why no one loves me. Trying to figure out what it is that I'm doing wrong. My heart and mind have been broken into a thousand pieces! And no one can fix me. Therapy doesn't work, the pills don't work. I'm just broken. The only surviving relic to escape this fucked up house!" I say as I begin walking out of the kitchen.

My mother died of heart failure minutes after shooting Adam years ago on this date. I think working up the nerve and then actually doing it was too much for her big heart. It was a stormy night and I thought the boom I heard was lightning or my imagination. The thunder became so aggressive I ran up stairs to my mother. I saw Adams body bled out at the base of the stairs. I felt nothing but urgent concern for my mother once I saw his body. Ran to their bedroom. I found her body laying on the foot of the bed. It fell to the floor as I came closer to touch her. I laid next to her till the next morning. The school bus driver found us all after coming to the door to see why I wasn't outside waiting.

I went to live with Adams sister after that. But every year I come back, since no one will buy the place considering the history, and have a chat with my mother. Always screaming at her while leaving, walking by all of the mangled furniture, all the mutilated walls and all the maimed memoirs in the house my father built.