

In A House of Vines

There was a slow rapping, knuckles dragging against our newly painted door. I felt as if I knew the knock. It was the knock of the police at your double-kegger when you're chatting up the soccer captain. It was the kind of knock that echoed and resonated through wood frames and soft blankets.

A flurry of movement and my robe was on. I wished it was something a bit more intimidating than the white puffs against sky blue but there wasn't time for a sharp blazer.

"Mrs. Kinds I presume?" asked the severe looking man glaring out of his suit. A suit that must have been labeled "autumn camouflage" in the gaudy clearance section of mall suits.

"I'm guessing you represent the bank,"

"That's correct. The balance on this property has fallen into zone deemed unacceptable. We've given you ample leeway but..." the banker paused, as if for some twisted dramatic effect.

"Mrs. Kinds if I may be so forward. There has correspondence between my clients and this property for some time with little result. It is clear you can no longer afford the payments and we've no choice but to reclaim our assets. This is the price to be paid for borrowing irresponsibly I'm afraid," the small man finished the statement with a scolding 'tut tut' of breath.

I hated him. There was a deep fury in me. The kind of pissed off that you feel when

something is so un-fucking-just that you simply have to beat the guy in front of you to a pulp. I felt my hands shaking.

“The realtor sounded a lot different than you. Come to think of it the bank sounded overjoyed to give its money to us. Then after the crash, once the house is worth nothing, here you are. You greedy bastards, sunk us in debt so deep that we may never fucking get out,” I clenched my teeth and said, “I think you should go,”

Kevin finally appeared grabbed my hand and helped it from shaking. I gave the suited devil a fuck you look and he seemed to get the hint.

Unphased, the man kept going, “I see this conversation is going nowhere. You have two days left to be moved out. We’ve given you over a month since our notice of foreclosure. However, now there are new buyers, perhaps more responsible buyers and they seek to purchase the debt on this property. As for you, we’re within our rights to evict you immediately. I’ll save my pity for a more agreeable couple. Good day.”

Kevin closed the door slowly. He rested his hand on the door, feeling the wood longingly, as if holding the hand of a loved one, praying for more time.

“He’s right you know”

“What did you say?””

“I can’t help but feel like it something we did, Mae. Maybe I made a mistake.” he said shaking his head. “So much is wrong, I wanted the house and family, now, since well, you’ve made it clear there’s not going to be a family, to lose the house too...”

“What do you want me to say Kevin, that you’ve finally done it, you’ve guilted me into having kids?”

“There’s nothing to say,”

With that he slumped against the door. I wish I had the right thing to say in these moments: something uplifting, something that the good wives born in the golden age of television would say to their husbands after a hard day. But I’m not that wife, nor do I want to be. Regardless, I hated letting him have the last word.

The day lingered on with a pungent smell of sulking hanging on the air. Then, just like we said we wouldn’t ever do, when we were still untouchable on our honeymoon in Fiji and protected by a squishy layer of fingertip touches and low giggles, resentment set in. I couldn’t say exactly when it started or even why, but things began to pile up.

On this occasion, Kevin was the first to break the silence by pulling his jacket off the back of the couch. “I’m going to grab a beer with the guys. I need one after today.”

“Remember, you’ve got work tomorrow.”

“I remember, I’m the only one who does now.”

I didn’t answer back as the door swung shut. I wanted to pretend that it was some throwaway last word comment because he was frustrated, and maybe if I had anyone here to talk to I could believe it. Someone to say ‘You are both going through some hard times, it’s not easy for anyone’ then we could laugh about something stupid and it would be okay.

But instead I was alone with the house we don’t own anymore. They don’t tell you

when you get married half your friends stop talking to because you're supposedly a shitty, dull housewife and the other half only talk to you because you're in the same carpool or sit next to you at work. Then when you cut out work, or work cuts you, you're left drifting and wishing someone would grab onto you just to prove that you're still real. I let the self-loathing lull me to sleep on the couch, hoping for something to change.

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I woke up to someone unlocking the door, the sound jolted me awake and set me into defense mode for a second until I realized it was Kevin drunkenly trying to get in. I walked to the door and checked the peephole. I opened it up and Kevin came in, looking objectively apologetic with his head slightly dipping.

"Hey Mae,"

"Well you're only half as drunk as I thought you would be."

"Yeah I talked with the guys for a while and they made me relax a bit and, you know, I was being a dick. Sometimes you just need to hear it from someone else."

"I know that feeling," I said, trying to bury the kernel of bitterness that had sent my mind reeling earlier. "I just feel like I'm far away and I don't know why, I wish we would at least have some good news about finding a new place."

"No luck yet huh?"

"I just can't find a damn thing. Not one. Not even a trailer. At this point I'd rent a room from a meth lab."

“Wanna join a commune?”

I smiled, even after fighting all day, he could still make me laugh, “ Co-farming, nudist, or were you thinking more religious cult type?”

“Eh, a blend is fine. I’m no purist.”

He grabbed my hips and pulled me on top of him, only thin cotton separating us.

I whispered in his ear, “Tell me it’s all going to be okay.”

“It’s all going to be okay. “

And for a moment, hearing him say that, I almost believed it.

Then my phone went off. One beep- I figured it must be an email. I gave Kevin a small kiss on his cheek and checked my email. Rentals.com send an update on my property search. 32 Kensington Dr. The property was a little out of the way but it was affordable, beautiful, and the timing was spectacular.

“No fucking way, you want some good news for once.”

“Please tell me you have something.”

“The pictures they sent look like an older Victorian; I think it’s gorgeous honestly. No idea how it’s still on the market.”

“Can we afford it? It sounds like maybe not.”

“No, no that’s the best part- dirt cheap.”

“Set up a viewing with the realtor, Mae. Thank God.”

“Yeah, fingers crossed though right? Hope it’s not some sorta Craig’s list killer scam.”

“I think they should be the one’s worrying, the audacity to fuck with some desperate people who just got foreclosed on? I think I’d let you use those hands of furry them next time.”

He smiled at me, and I felt all warm again. This house could be it. It had to be the saving grace of this shit-storm. We needed it to be

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Floral was the word our realtor Jess used. Overgrown seemed more appropriate. The beautiful Victorian I had seen online now looked like a swamp-temple. I would only have been half surprised to find a cult of New Age Voodoo praying in the living room.

“Are we still in the front yard or have we gotten into the actual house yet? I can’t quite separate the two.”

“Oh no this is the front garden. The previous owners were really into it. Some interesting exotic species too! Your garden will be the talk of the neighborhood I’m sure.”

I saw her flash the classic realtor whites that littered her many bus stop bench ads but there was a strange way she formed the words. They sounded wrong somehow. Like watching a dancing bear, funny but unnatural and as she turned, her yellow blazer tempting us in like bees to a flower. As we walked in felt a moist rush of air wash over me

as she opened the door. I grabbed Kevin's arm which was also standing on end. It was if the whole house had breathed out as we came in, or....sighed.

"Well this is the living room as you can tell," The realtor droned on in the usual way while I began searching for the little things that make or break a home: cracks in the foundation, mold forming in the walls, or the occasional dead body in the air ducts. Things that needed explanation or fixing before it was move in ready. But this house was different. Not a crack in the walls, not a chip of paint missing, it was unnerving- like looking at a manikin.

"What do you think, Mae?" Kevin looked at me expectantly, probably waiting for a list of complaints.

"I don't see anything too off honestly."

"Nothing huh, I'm a bit disappointed. I was hoping you were going to tell me this place was about to collapse on us. Something."

"Nada, nothing to report, brown eyes." I saluted sarcastically.

"Private Madeline that sounds to me like insubordination. I'll see to punishing you at a more convenient time, perhaps in my quarters."

I slightly and clicked my tongue at him playfully.

The realtor was going through the motions as if attached to strings controlled by some unknown puppeteer. She opened the pantry door, explaining the importance of shelf space, but I had drifted over to the sink. There was something strange about it. A swamp

like smell emanated from the inner drain that was crusted with a mossy coat of green.

“How old is this sink?”

“Well the hand-carved wood the sink sits in is as old as the house. The type of wood used was quite strong. Victorians you know.”

“But the sink itself, it smells like it needs a good bit of cleaning or,” I stopped mid-sentence after I had lifted the lever to start the water only to hear a groan in the pipes, then brown after rain creek colored water surge from the faucet. The sink filled with specks of dirt and other matter, even small pebbles. It looked exactly like a rising creek, powered by far rains and washes.

Kevin stuck his hands in the water and pulled them out, a coffee colored hue hung about his pale fingers.

“So is this just what this city water looks like or...”

“No, I assure you this must just be the old water in the pipes...we haven’t turned on water to the property yet.”

I watched her carefully turn off the muddy water. The realtor’s eyes lingered on the liquid as if thirsty for it herself.

“Should I get you a glass?” I asked her with mixed confusion and curiosity. I expect her to laugh or surely say something, Kevin giggled quietly to himself but the realtor said nothing.

We moved towards the upstairs, the steps creaking slightly at our weight. Jess

droned on with her realtor routine, as if breathing.

“Here is the master bedroom.” She said as she open the door to reveal a spacious room with several conditioning vents. For a moment I thought I detected a specific scent, like a perfume but one of infinite familiarity. It made me feel strangely at ease. That peace did not last long though.

“The next room is the nursery. Perfect house to raise a family in.”

She winked at us and flashed an empty smile. I turned away and tried to walk on but Kevin stopped, lingering about the door frame.

“I would have liked to use this room,” Kevin said blandly.

Just like that, we’re back at it.

“We can use it for a study, or an entertainment room, or whatever,” I ventured casually.

“Yeah, guess that’s true. I wish we could have used it for what it was made for,” then he looked at me expectantly, “Maybe we still can?”

“We’re going to do this, right now? In front of her?” I said in a hushed voice, nodding my head at Jess who I had been expecting would be looking at the floor or pretending not to hear us but instead held a deadpan stare at the both of us. As if she had just decided something quietly to herself but couldn’t be bothered to look away.

“I’ll just put it away, like we always do huh Mae. Just forget that we not having kids.” I glared but didn’t speak. Good except for this one thing, this one damn thing. I thought

bitterly. I never wanted kids. When we were dating, when we got engaged, and he always said, 'Oh we don't have to worry about that now' but as soon as the ring is on he's trying to convince me. As if I was just waiting for a wedding and suddenly now I want kids.

"Well that concludes our viewing," She said bluntly. "I'm sorry about the water. I'll have that fixed immediately."

"Well wait one second, Jess" I said.

I looked at Kevin and he looked back motioning that we should talk about, what I can only assume to be, an offer to rent the place.

"We need a place Mae. I know it's not perfect but we're kinda out of options."

"As much as I hate it, you're right." I agreed and looked at my shoes on the hardwood floors; I teetered back and forth knowing we had only one choice.

"We'll take it."

The realtor smiled and for a moment I thought I saw a flash of green.

"You'll not regret this choice, Mr. and Mrs. Kinds. I've got the paperwork with me. The place can be move in ready by tomorrow."

Kevin hugged me and I allowed myself to be held. Yet there was a deep something, a dark something moist and lurking in the perfect porcelain walls: some sort of bad seed in the place.

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The ambient sound of the male Cicada love song continued to piece the air with a buzzing that sounded the summer season. It was just before dark and I could see painted nimbus clouds on the horizon. It would storm tonight.

“Hope we don’t find any unexpected holes in the roof.”

Kevin looked at me but said nothing. He had been in a sort of mood since the movers had finished late this afternoon. I thought it might just be the move, or his job, or something small that had turned septic and changed into a grey-black storm of spiraling thought. They say that when you get married you share every thought. I guess in some ways I shouldn’t have expected him to change. I didn’t change.

Even so, we sat for a while listening to the dull hum of the Cicadas in the trees. Stared into the overgrown backyard that was covered in vines and moss, the greenhouse where plants had grown through cracked glass, and an old wood shed that must house dozens of dark, wriggling things.

Kevin finally spoke in a tone that I hate. It was his sarcastic, setting me up to get pissed off at him tone. He was picking a fight, after how good everything was yesterday.

“Going to be tough for the kids to run around and play back here, with all the weeds and God knows what. Probably pick up some jungle disease their first summer. What a treat for them.”

“This again Kevin? I told you when we first started dating, years ago, I can’t...you know I can’t.”

“You mean don’t want to, say what you mean.”

“Well...I never considered it before, but maybe adoption? There’s already so many people in the world and-”

“What?” Kevin cut in, “ A mix of six African and Asian orphans? I want my family, my genes. Not some Brad Pitt-Angelina Jolie media family with people saying, ‘You’re so brave to adopt!’ Is it too much to say I want to be able to say my daughter has her mother’s eyes. Am I such a prick to think that when my son meets my dad I can tell him where his family came from!”

“Where the hell is this coming from? Why are you being so shitty, so damn shitty when the day’s been hard enough already. “

“Well maybe this isn’t how I thought things would workout, maybe I thought I’d have a wife and we would have a family together. What a crime.”

“Fucking today, Kevin, you picked today?”

I’m sure he was going to say something else but I wasn’t about to listen to another word. I couldn’t believe him. Yesterday we were holding hands; yesterday things were going to be okay. Now, I was pissed beyond words. I slammed doors for no reason other than to hear the power I had over them. Then I slammed my door and locked it.

I could hear Kevin puttering about downstairs in his usual pouty way. Probably sulking and haunting the fridge for a beer. He would find the couch eventually after he spun out his dark thoughts and discontent. When white guys of a certain age doesn’t get exactly

what they want when they want it, an adult tantrum is to be expected. I thought and stewed, vitriol words still running through my mind. He knows how much that hurts. Not like I can fucking change it. Not everyone wants to be a mom.

Then, the air smelled different in the room. Quite different. Suddenly, Kevin and our fight was pushed from my mind. It was a sweet smell. In some ways it was like the smell of sweat, but filled with a musk-like note that resonated in my chest. I drank it in: breath by breath. Suddenly I was tired, endlessly tired. The clock read 8 p.m. but it felt like I had never slept in my life.

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I awoke in a sweat sometime later. My mind was reeling. What had I been doing, what had I been thinking? Something, surely it was something. I am in bed, but it didn't feel like sleeping or dreaming, more like a bottle of tequila that I had guzzled down and then been hit with. Without thinking I looked out my window at the greenhouse. The moon hung lazily in the sky but its light was cast against the crusted glass. It looked like trying to see through a plastic shower curtain, covered with dirt and lime from the hard water that pumped from the sprinklers.

I was drawn to it. Pulled like birds migrating south, by some unknown natural force. I found my hand turning the knob on the door. The house felt different now. Alive somehow. But the air, the air was still sweet, wet, like a post-coital drip of fluid intense and exhausting all at the same time. Yet my feet moved, and, while my eye remained hazy, my feet found steps as if they were growing in front of me.

Kevin lounged on the couch, undoubtedly uncomfortable, but I felt no sympathy for him. Not because of the fight, that felt like a childhood memory to me now, but rather because I regarded him as another animal. Like watching a dog or cat sleep and dream, I simply did not want to wake him but that was as far as the emotional depth went. All I knew now was the air and the desire to reach the greenhouse.

The backyard open up to me like a Night Bloom Water Lily or a Primrose, the grass felt soft, as if the grass had been cut for this particular journey by some unknown entity. There was a person inside; I could see them- a shadow against the glass, only seen by peering in carefully through the gaps in dirt and plant matter. The glass door was left ajar, like a mouth inviting in a lover's tongue. I walked through.

Even the sweet air and the draw to this greenhouse could not suppress my surprise. It was the realtor. The woman with the green smile was standing before me. Vines were attached to her arm although attached seems to be the wrong explanation. They were her arms or at least being injected into them like fluorescent green needles. There was also an energy plus. A clear light moved from the vines to this woman.

"Fine night isn't it, Mae. It is Mae right? I tend to forget my viewers names after the process is complete. Or...showing that's what I used to call it, before."

I wanted to yell, to scream, but it felt like my brain was fighting itself. I was painfully at ease. My entire vocabulary of fantastic curse words was removed, still there but inaccessible.

I feel, confused, angry but I feel like I can't do anything.

“I remember feeling that way with the first house. But I also remember the troubles I was having, the worries, frets, trivial things in the grander scheme.”

“The grander scheme?”

“Compared to life on a massive scale. Biospheres of interconnection, plants working with animals, symbiotic relationships that run deeper than roots. It’s a bit hard to explain verbally. It wasn’t explained to me with words. Just with knowing.”

I didn’t know what to say or really what was going on, the perfume of something intoxicating filled my nostrils pushing me to say say, but it was still me making the decision.

The realtor sensed my hesitation, “It may be hard to believe, but take my hand, just for a second.”

She reached for my hand and I slowly took it. Thunderstorm booms shook my nerves and put goosebumps along my arms and shoulders, I felt something, something in me being made whole, a connection to so much life so much thought and togetherness. The antithesis of isolation was spread out before me like a road map to blissful oblivion. I felt life surge through me and out of me through the vines and the grass and the house itself.

Then the connection was severed, and I was back in the greenhouse with my loneliness and melancholy magnified tenfold. The realtor’s face was placid as a stagnant pond. But her eyes were lit with a dark, cultish fire like the glossy eyes of a Manson family initiate.

“ It’s choice. It is a choice to know and be a part of something bigger, ingrained in a

system, and your part to play within that system. But it's not the same as your life. You would be...changed."

I wanted to say no, or at least say something. I notice a slow creep of vines from the overgrown walls. They crept, slithered, and slunk. The warped little knobs tightened around my calves like grasping spindly hands. I breathed in deep, the deep sweetness, and leaned back against the glass wall, cushioned by bio material covering all but a few sparse patches where moonlight shined through like bullet holes.

But it felt like peace. Like an unearthly peace, a peace that I've thought I never could find, a sort of giving in but building molecule by molecule a better version of you. At first the creep of the stems felt foreign, they dug into my veins like needles, but I felt no incision, like a topical anesthetic. Then I felt the stems pulse. A shuddering, seizure-like impairment of fear and unbridled relaxation flooded me, then everything. I opened all of myself up to it.

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There was a slow drip in the house. More than a leaky faucet but less than a shower head. It was the kind of drip that wakes you up in the middle of the night with a panicky need to stop the incessant dripping. Be it fate or faculties, Kevin woke to the dripping. But we had changed the house he knew. Yes there were walls of course. Floors to walk upon and what now but the ruse was up the house was beginning to show its leaves.

"Fucking noise", Kevin mumbled groggily.

He climbed off the couch in a half drunk stupor that usually accompanies a binge filled evening. Unseen eyes watched him stand up and test out the floor that was now

spongy and moist. It was not the wood floor the living room had when he went to sleep. But then there was that incessant dripping again, so he kept walking.

He walked towards the basement door, oblivious to the mouse that skirted his feet. This same mouse ran to a nearby thatch of glowing red berries and devoured the berries greedily. As greedily as the mouse ate the fruit, the trap of the overwrought Venus plant closed. A slight squeak, then there was nothing. Kevin was again euphorically ignorant of the interaction.

Instead, Kevin turned the handle to the basement door. The knob was slick with condensation. It took a second try for Kevin to manage to get the door open. He looked in without taking a step. The room was quiet. It was like standing on a faraway mesa or the moments after a monsoon has subsided, when the jungle is silent.

“What the hell...Mae,” he yelled murkily into the darkness. “The basement looks all flooded to fuck! Busted pipe maybe I’m...”

Then, like we knew he would. He fell. The stairs, if they could be called that now, sent him sliding towards a deep pond that was now the basement.

Kevin looked about dashing forward to look for a leak, or something to be fixed, patched. If not patched at least a way out, a way up. Instead, he fell deeper into the pool until he had to tread water to stay afloat.. The ground gave no grip for his bare skin, nothing to grasp. Even the stairs sloped like a great tongue sloping towards a liquid gullet. Just like was planned.

The air became heavier and suddenly Kevin found it difficult to breath. He

desperately treaded water but his skin began to burn against the water around him. Like acid, the water was burning at him. Eventually the gullet swallowed him whole. His body breaking apart as he sunk to the floor of the water filled room. Consumed entirely, his body would be useful in other ways. The house must be fed and fed well.

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My hands dipped in and out of the letters, grazed the keyboard like planting seeds for an upcoming harvest. Like the light of a lantern-fish I dangled houses in-front of buyers and sellers, realtors and foreclosure agents. Yet, while I felt the needs of a larger biosphere pulling me toward its desires, I retained a bit of I in the sea of we. We made sure to send a letter of foreclosure to that gaudy suited agent from a lifetime ago. We hope to see him soon.