

The Rooms and the Walls and the Roof

The child in his mother's arms is the new mornings, afternoons, and some evenings. The elastic band around her head crests with a pink bow centered above a slackening brow. Both dolly hands have finally relaxed in an abdomen of cotton folds. She collects against the alternate bosom like a pile of warm laundry with eyes, a nose, and a mouth. The miniature legs just peek over much older arms cradled into a pot of flesh and bone. The feet wilt over its rim like a plant in want of water. The restless and attentive spirit of this child, worn down by the strange environs of another home has finally dipped into sleep. She now trawls her unconscious for something more fascinating and frightening to explore. Somewhere at the edge of this child's heart, a small stake is being driven into a corner, reserving a piece to corrode, to hate the woman that leaves her alone every day with this stranger.

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Andi watches his Mother at the front door. There is excitement, caution, and peril before she is handed this check each Friday. The jawbone pulses, stamping her cheek, a little heartbeat. She tongues a tooth in the back of her mouth, switching from side to side. Her hands are clutched and flutter in wait. Sometimes her hand is out a little too early to take the check. The woman that pays her is Dana. Dana is short and fat and always forgets how to spell her last name. She laughs when she is wrong and is always nodding when she is not speaking.

“It's with an IE, not an EY,” his Mom says, looking over the check. She likes to see how others write their letters and numbers differently than she does.

“That’s right,” Dana says, laughing. “I’m Sorry.”

When Dana’s husband picks up the girl, he never apologizes. He doesn’t apologize for misspelling her name, for being late, or for missing the driveway and parking on the lawn. Still, when the door is closed and locked on Friday, there is hope. The baby girl--Megan--started at the home at four weeks old and today marks twelve. Twelve weeks just might reach that number in years. Megan might even one day soon get a little brother and further brand his Mom’s skill-set as a caretaker and guarantee her future as a reliable employee.

Andi, not quite nine years old, knows that the yellow 1967 mustang is no longer in the garage. The piano that was in the dining room has also disappeared. His Mom was not upset after selling the car, but he did find her sitting in the middle of the corners that held the residual dimples in the carpet when she got rid of the piano.

“Say, ‘bye’ to Megan,” his Mother says to Andi.

“Bye.”

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Andi’s Granddad, Papoe, helps Andi make the dots on his Halloween costume by using a black bingo blotter. Andi is going as one half of a pair of dice. Papoe says he is probably going as a clown, but he is only going to wear a red nose. Andi feels safer this year.

There is a boy in his neighborhood a little older than him that always dresses like a skeleton. The costume is the same costume every year, one-piece and zipped up in the back. The bones, however, have been getting larger and thinner because the boy is getting older and bigger. Last year, this boy cut off the black booties and walked in bare feet; where once his feet could slip inside the outfit, the shorn legs now hugged his hairy calves. He’d also cut the costume in half so

his midriff could fit, the one piece severed into two that could no longer contain a stomach that had started to dip over his waist.

“What about your shoes?”

“The nose,” Papoe says, “will be loud enough.”

Mom lifts a finger and partitions her lips, a warning to them both to lower the volume of their play. The subtle warning is coupled by a not so subtle smile. This gesture of affection behind a veil of punishment reminds Andi’s of his new responsibility that he is not reluctant to both understand and reject.

That girl in her arms is not his sister.

“Hey, guy.” Papo pulls Andi towards him, corralling the boy against a favored thigh to talk quietly. “Them birds hatch yet?”

“I don’t know.” Andi is embarrassed that his enthusiasm was interrupted. He softly and repeatedly kicks the side of the unfinished die with his bare foot.

Mom whispers over her shoulder to go ahead and “check and see,” turning and walking towards the room at the end of the long hall that has been darkened to receive both her and her sleeping parcel in peace.

Papo says, “It’s okay,” letting him go.

The texture in his Grandfather’s voice is softening again. There is a measured loss of interest and strength in using his words. He lifts himself with satellite glances at the boy and his daughter, gathering what strength is left to lie himself down out of sight. When he goes down for his naps, Andi will sometimes search for things on his body, like the coffee stains on his teeth, the skin tags on his eyes, and the ink stains under his nails.

Andi helps his Papoe use the restroom sometimes. Together, they will unzip his pants and tuck a towel in his slacks. They’ll dip the catheter in lubricant then feed the rubber tube into the

stoma at the abdomen wall until it taps the reservoir and empties the urine into the toilet. Papo always lets Andi do the flushing. When his friends visit, he likes to tell them that his Grandfather keeps a bag of urine in his pocket. They never believe him.

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The biggest tree in the backyard has in its branches a woven Easter basket cushioned with green tinsel and two eggs. Andi already knows they are boiled chicken eggs and will never hatch. His Mom put them there because he'd asked for a parrot at summer.

One morning he found the water boiling in the kitchen. Andi was up earlier than expected because he wanted to pretend to never wake up for school. He got dressed before she was supposed to come in and wake him, then slipped back into bed to trick her. She did not come that morning and it was too hot to wait any longer fully clothed underneath the covers. He changed his mind about his trick when he saw her climbing back down the tree.

Andi climbs past the eggs and finds himself a seat by lodging in the crook of naked branches. He looks over his neighborhood. There are no children trawling the streets for candy yet, nor their adult chaperones. From here, he can see the same houses that are always for sale. He can see the chain-link fence around the high school where sometimes he finds money and pornography stuck like wallpaper when the wind is strong. He can see the cul-de-sac where he is sometimes invited to play baseball with the other boys. He can also see that his miniature pink plastic golf club is still on the roof of the neighbor's house.

Andi's Mom loves frogs. She fills the bathroom with them: a frog toothbrush holder, frog hand towels, frog candles, a frog themed toilet cover and tissue dispenser. Everywhere, frogs.

When Andi finally saw a real one in their backyard in the garden, he killed it. With his pink plastic golf club, he accidentally beat it to death. He kept turning it over belly to back for its life to be renewed, but the life did not return. So he buried it where he bludgeoned it and threw the club on the roof then hid in the tree for hours until his Mom started to whistle into the neighborhood for him to come home.

She has tried to teach him how to whistle like she does by placing just two fingers in her mouth and blowing with your gut, but he only gets his hands wet.

Instead of climbing down and checking on the farce in the basket, he walks along the branch, looks over the fence, and jumps.

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Their garage is always open. It has never housed a car. The space is always taugth with junk, like the bowels of some great beast and all its undigested bits. Michael is working on a lawnmower today. He does not get haircuts and his shirts don't have sleeves anymore. Michael sees Andi in the driveway and asks if he ever goes home.

“Is Steven here?”

“No,” he says, cigarette smoke ornamenting his words. “Go home.”

When Michael isn't looking, Andi moves his pack of cigarettes from the cold burner of the decommissioned oven to its cold and calloused grate.

“Don't,” Michael says, punctuating the warning, “touch anything.”

There are no footsteps first before Steven plummets from the roof. The spy in their midst rolls only once then pulls out a long sword from his belt and all black regalia. The weapon he has

drawn swings forward but stops short of severing Andi's head. "You're dead," Steven says, the instrument poised across Andi's neck.

A small portal in the costume's head is its only opening. Andi can see that the freckles between Steven's eyes do not have the same shape as the freckles he remembers on his legs, or his back, or his neck. He notes how similar they look against this setting sun to the sand in the bowl his Uncle used when he once taught Andi how to pan for gold.

"Oh, shit." Steven touches Andi's neck and keeps a drop of blood for himself. Andi leans in to inspect the evidence on the top of Steven's finger then leans back to check his neck. It's only a nick, but the risk is not lost.

"That thing's real?"

Steven pulls off the hood and exchanges the costume of a covert Ninja for a regular boy with big brown eyes and long brown hair. "It wasn't my fault, man. Didn't mean it." He doesn't know what else to do but laugh.

Andi doesn't laugh, but neither can he locate anger. Though he is startled by the wound and the potential of harm he evaded, being both at the expense and blunt edge of a joke or an accident is still fulfilling. Steven is only two years older than Andi, but still a much older boy. He already smells like cooking wine.

"Go inside," Michael says.

"Hey, Mike," Steven starts, closing in on him with the swagger of a younger brother with a promise to break. "Why don't you show us how you can walk through walls like you keep sayin' you can? Go on. Fucking do it, man. Walk through walls, man."

The grin across Michael's face is quick to come and go. If he ever regretted mentioning the fringe idea, it does no show. He pulls back the long panel of hair that has gotten too close to the blades of the machine and rests it over his shoulder. "You're too young."

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The blankets and the quilts and the towels and the tablecloths have been pulled and emptied and stripped from the home to create the rooms and the walls and the roof of this little house the boys have built inside of Steven's bedroom. The clashing patchwork of patterned textiles is propped up by furniture they pooled from the rest of the house. The home is held into place by clothespins and anchored by loose weights--lamps, a sewing machine, a potted rosemary plant. You can't enter or exit without crawling first.

“Hand me that stack of encyclopedias,” Steven asks Andi, adding more weight to a convergence of vital blankets on a kitchen stool.

Once it has been built, they lie down together to admire their work and silently consider how to improve upon this accomplishment. They think big.

“I bet,” Steven starts. “I bet we can get a TV inside.”

Their makeshift house is suddenly pulled shapeless, disappearing like a magic trick. Neither boy could remember at that moment hearing a warning before the incoming wrath. The force that demolishes their place folds them inside a dangerous avalanche of spare parts like a page of a pop-up book, turning and collapsing onto itself. The sewing machine that lands near Andi's feet is followed by the desk on which it had been placed. When Andi can finally open his eyes, he finds Steven against the wall.

Michael doesn't allow Steven to move or breath. The skin that has stretched crimson over the bones that have locked in Steven's face elevate the whites in his eyes and teeth to a spectral glow. The hollow snap of Steven's nose that comes next surprises them both. Michael pulls back

his fist but holds it aloft and waits for Steven to spit it out. While he waits, the blood from the nose reaches the hand around Steven's neck and dresses Michael's thumbnail like nail polish. Steven's defiance is coarse and falsetto; his words are abstract and curdled by a constricted throat filling with liquids. "I didn't--I didn't take your fucking--cigar--ettes...you fuck."

Michael lets him go, but Steven doesn't leave the wall. Instead, he watches Michael steal the money from his piggy bank--a Waffen-SS helmet--on his shelf. "Hey! Hey, that's my fucking money! Hey, that's my shit. What the fuck, man!"

Steven laughs when he cries, a strange and confounding noise that Andi has only heard on one other occasion. It always frightens him.

Michael leaves the room and returns to the garage while Steven enters the hall and fills the home with his grievances. "Hey, Michael. Give it back! I didn't--I don't know where your stupid cigarettes are! You asshole!"

Steven waits for an answer, but there is nothing for him. The house is empty again. He turns to the door at the end of the hall and waits for the woman behind it to wake up. There is a clothes hanger on the handle. Steven once told Andi that a clothes hanger on the door handle meant, "Go away." Steven pulls the hood back over his face and exits the house.

Andi waits. The echoes disappear like pond water ripples. For a moment, Andi remembers the first time he got lost in a grocery store. He was four. He stood there very still and gathered the momentum of his fear until he could not wait any longer. There was an excitement in the risk of never being found.

He finally gets to his feet after hearing someone in the kitchen.

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Steven's dog, Snowball, is trying to climb the counter and reach the dinner bones in the sink.

Snowball is a small white dog that looks like the bottom of a dirty mop. The hair is matted and the ends of every strand looks dipped in filth. The eyes and mouth are hidden by the body's sullied coat, but the nose sticks out like a little pink and brown knot.

There is still asparagus on one of the plates. Steven hates asparagus; they remind him of rattlesnakes. On a trip to the Alamo years earlier, following the funeral of a grandfather he never met, his Mother pulled over on a country road so he could use the restroom. Steven decided to pee in a blue bonnet patch. The serpent made its presence known, but it did not strike. Steven returned to the car without pulling up his pants or emptying his bladder or telling his Mom the truth. So the vegetable still returns to his plate then ends up in the sink. Andi remembers the story because his Mom was the first to have him over for dinner when he got back in town. She made him an extra side of broccoli instead.

The doorbell rings. Andi answers the door but walks past the four children costumed and waiting for their candy in pumpkin bins and pillow cases. Steven is playing in his front lawn and has replaced his sword with a large stick to twirl around his wrists and neck, breaking it apart against the trunk of a tree, piece by piece. Andi can hear his Mom's evening whistle across the neighborhood for him to come home.

Across the street, both boys notice at once that Chuck has left his house for the mailbox. Chuck remarried a woman with red hair and is always carrying a football. He is the only neighbor that has both a toilet and a urinal in his bathroom. He lets them use the urinal whenever they want. When his son, Chad, comes home on Holidays, he will show the boys strange pictures of black people, cartoons of black people, scary images of black people, and even

sometimes play them songs about black people that are supposed to be funny. Andi laughs because Steven laughs and Steven laughs because Chad laughs.

Chuck waves at every car that passes and every car that passes waves back. He is costumed as a scarecrow, the straw sticking out from his arms, his wrists, his neck. He sees Andi and Steven, tucks the mail under his arm, then taps the football against his palm to gain their consent. When he throws the ball into the sky, the boys lift their eyes, raise their hands, and both run out into the middle of the street.

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