

The Abandoned House

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In New York my mother asks a pair of teenage girls with long straight hair and braces to watch me as she goes into the other room to have a serious conversation with the adults. We sit in a small living room. White doilies are positioned neatly on the curved armrests of the tweed sofa. I show the girls how I can write my name and they are impressed because it has so many letters.

“Nine,” I say. I can count too.

I tell them that I am almost as tall as our dog, Kleeko. I sing them songs that I know by heart and they clap their hands and flash their metal smiles.

My mother is distant when she comes out of the room alone and her hand is cold as she walks me outside. I wave goodbye to the girls as she pulls me along.

“Bye, Char,” they say. “Come back and visit us.”

My mother weeps quietly as we sit in the back of the car waiting for someone to drive us somewhere and now that I’m four, I know better than to ask. It’ll just make things worse.

When we get there she tells me that it is very, very important that I be good in front of my uncle. His name is Howard and he is my father’s brother. I must make a good impression, she says, and I like him at once, so it’s easy. I put on a show for him where I sing a song and make up a dance to go with it right on the spot. He and my aunt laugh and applaud. My mother goes on and on about how talented and smart I am. She says I am going to be the next Shirley Temple, which is the highest honor she can give me. She praises me so much in front of them that it starts to sound desperate and feel like I’m up for auction. Some of the things she says I have never heard before, like how there are talent agents begging to meet me. My uncle and his wife share a knowing glance after she says this. A glance that

says, "This is what we were talking about earlier," and I know then, that talent agents aren't really begging to meet me.

Later, we are standing in a bright white kitchen when my aunt pats me on the shoulder and discovers the matted hair around my neck. She lifts up the smooth layer on top and asks my mother, "June, don't you brush her hair?"

My mother says, "What do you mean? Of course I brush her hair." She's is incensed by my aunt's comment and jerks me away from her. "Why would you say that? Charmagne has beautiful hair." She gets on her knees, wraps her arms tightly around me and rocks me back and forth. "Why would you say that about her?"

"Her hair is beautiful, June, but you need to keep it brushed or it's going to get out of control. That's all I meant."

My mother releases her smothering embrace and holds me by the shoulders so we're face to face. She angles her head to one side and I can see the tears streaming down as her eyes scan my hair. She smooths the top layer gently with her hand. "Allen loved her hair."

"June, stop that," my aunt says flatly. "All I'm saying is that maybe it would be a good idea, now that Allen's gone, if you got Char's hair cut a little shorter so it's easier to manage."

My mother stands up and yells, "Cut her hair? No! I would never let you cut her hair!" Her voice trembles and her hands ball up into fists. "Oh my God!" she screams to the ceiling, "Not in a million years would I ever let you cut her hair!" Her head is shaking back and forth violently now. She puts her hands on her cheeks to slow it down. "What are you trying to do? How can you say that?"

She runs into the other room and I can hear her crying out my uncle's name. "Howard! Howard! She wants to cut Char's hair!" I imagine her collapsing into him, whimpering and shaking. "Oh, Howard," I hear her cry, "Allen would never let that happen."

My aunt turns to me in the kitchen and I try to give her the same knowing glance that I witnessed earlier. She smiles back and pats my head.

“Let’s get your hair brushed out,” she says as she walks to the pantry and pulls out a metal step stool. The rubber feet clutch the floor as she props it up in the middle of the kitchen and unfolds the bottom to make stairs. “Climb up here,” she says patting the butt-shaped seat and I do.

My hair is in braids when we go for a drive later on, but my aunt doesn’t come with us. She says, “No, you guys go ahead. I’ve got a bridge game.”

We’re headed to the house where my father grew up. No one lives there now, but maybe I would like to see it. There are other people in the car with us, a girl a few years older than me with red hair and freckles, her mother, another girl who is still just a baby, and my uncle. He’s driving. I sit in the back with the girls, the adults sit up front.

The house is made of chiseled grey stone. It’s dark and cool when we walk inside, but many of the windows are broken out. I can hear the birds chirping to remind me it’s still daylight. My mother is nagging me, telling me, “Don’t step on the glass, Char,” but I have shoes on, so what does it matter if I step in the glass? Every room I walk into, she is right there behind me, pulling me back by the shoulders, telling me to be careful, be careful, don’t touch that, be careful. But she gets sidetracked pining for more of my uncle’s attention and I escape her grasp. I run ahead of her, up the stairs. “Oh Char! Don’t go up there!” She yells, but my uncle tells her it’s alright, let me be.

The freckled girl follows me up the stairs and we creep through the dark hallway together. “I bet it’s haunted,” she says, and my eyes go wide because just at that moment I was wondering if my father’s ghost might come back to this house to settle in. We open the doors slowly, peering through each crack, afraid to go into the rooms all the way. The wallpaper is yellowing with hand painted flowers and elaborate stripes. The sunlight sneaks through the window exposing the grey dust whispering through the air. The wall is less faded where a fancy dressing table used to sit and I can see the swirly outline of a

headboard next to it. I imagine the furniture as a dusty ghost, pointing out at me from the wall with ornately carved fingers.

When the adults come upstairs, I go back downstairs to step in the glass. I wander into each room and touch everything she told me not to touch, the window sill with the flaking paint, the old fashioned telephone attached to an arched cut out in the wall. In the kitchen I find a pantry and I imagine the shelves filled with boxes and cans of food for cooking with a step stool, like my aunt's. I had never seen a pantry before my aunt's house. We eat TV dinners at home and I'm not allowed to cook them by myself, even though I've seen her do it and it doesn't look that hard. She gets mad at me when I scoop out handfuls of margarine from the refrigerator at home, but I like the way it feels cool and hard on my tongue. I let it sit there until it warms up then I make it slide down my throat one drop at a time.

I walk out the back door to the unfenced yard. In California, all the back yards are private and fenced off, so here when I look down the rows of houses I feel like I am intruding. Each has a different landscape. Some have lawn furniture with umbrellas, flower beds and children's toys strewn about. Some are neat and manicured, and some, like this one, have vines growing wildly through the grass and up the trees. In California, if people neglect their yards they become pale and dusty quick. The weeds that are in our backyard now are prickly and I'm not supposed to touch them because they will sting. Here, it just looks like the woods. Everything's a deep emerald green so even the tallest grass seems inviting.

I see a dog running up and down the alleys between the houses and into the different yards, so I go outside and say, "Here, puppy." He runs up to me with his tail wagging and his tongue hanging out. He's has a pointy nose, like Kleeko, but he's much smaller and grayer and his coat is sprinkled with peppery splotches. I wish Kleeko could have come with us to New York. He likes to stand next to me all the time, everywhere I go, so he is probably wondering where I am. Sometimes he gets in my way since he's so big, but my father taught me to use a deep voice when I tell him to lie down and he listens to me

most of the time. I make him jump on my shoulders so I can give him a hug, but only when my mom's not looking, because it makes her so nervous. This speckled dog is too short to jump on my shoulders so I have to bend down to give him a hug. I wonder if the people here share their dogs like they share their yards.

When I walk back into the house it seems quieter than before. I go into the living room and look through the broken window to the front yard. I notice the car is gone but all of a sudden, I feel something poking my foot that makes me look down. I am standing in the glass again and there's a chunk of it stuck in the rubber sole of my shoe. I sit down quickly to pull it out before they come back, but I forget about the glass on the floor and it pokes me through my shorts. I jump back up before it cuts me. I forget about the glass in my shoe and when I step back down on it, it pokes me again. I look around for a spot on the floor without glass, but it's everywhere now, like it's waiting to attack me. I have to walk on my heel through the glass maze in order to get to the porch and I'm crying when I finally sit down on the front steps. I can't pull the chunk of glass out by myself because it's stuck. I have to wait for an adult to do it for me but they all left in the car without me. She told me not to step in the glass. If I had been a good girl, maybe I would have listened. I'm mad that she was right.

It's a long time before they come back. A long, long time. The speckled dog runs up to me on the porch, but I tell him through my sobbing that I can't play with him now because of the glass in my shoe. I try to tell him to lie down in a deep voice, but all he wants to do is jump around and wag his tail. I try to shoo him away, but he won't go. I yell at him to go home and I push him away, hard. I scream at the top of my lungs, "Go home dog! Just go home!" and I think to myself that's what I want to do. I want to go home to my daddy who brushes my hair and stays up with me and doesn't forget about me, but all that's left of him now is this cold empty house and this piece of glass stuck in my shoe and it's never going to get any better.

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