

The Attic Room

The house I grew up in is going to be demolished. A danger to the public, they say, too weathered by time, twenty years abandoned, barely standing upright, collecting dust like picture frames on the top shelf.

I'm happy it's going to be destroyed. My mother, not me, was the one who loved that house, felt connected to each and every wall, each creaky floorboard. She was the one, not me, who spent hours weeping on the front steps, hands pressed tenderly against the wood, when my father died and she had to move away. I'm happy it's going to be destroyed, I am sure of that.

I wonder if she knows about it yet, if the mail has arrived at her retirement village, if her tired eyes have scanned the letter from the city hall. She'll cry over the destruction of wooden walls and cement foundations. She won't call me on the phone to ask me how I feel, and I won't call her. My mother and I, we have never understood each other.

A week after I get the notice, I go out with friends after work.

“This weather is awful,” says Caleb. “Had to spend this morning shoveling the driveway.”

I nod. “Terrible.” The past couple of weeks it has snowed throughout the Boston area like never before.

“Hey Lily,” Anna says to me, “didn’t you use to live in California as a kid? Where it was like, sunny all year?”

The sky was always blue in the Salinas Valley. Good for long walks, for running through the sprinklers. My mother had a giant vegetable garden in the backyard, and tall, tall sunflowers.

That garden is probably dead and rotting now.

“It wasn’t that great,” I say.

After dinner, I zip my coat up to my chin and slip on my gloves. I am still shivering when I get back to my apartment, and something about the California sky stays in my mind longer than it should, pulling me forward, or maybe holding me back. I can’t tell yet. Maybe it’s curiosity, or self-loathing, but when I am bundled in my warm sheets with the heater cranked high, I google flights from Boston to San Jose to Monterey to Salinas, rental cars, and hotel prices.

It is the temptation of blue sky. Nothing more, I am sure of that.

Click purchase. Confirm.

Two days later, I am on a plane to California. I do not think about my mother at the airport, the hotel, or at the car rental the next morning.

The sky is blue. The road is long, highways wide, and the steering wheel feels different in my hands as stretching fields and rolling hills fly by. It does not feel like I am going home. I am glad it doesn't.

The traffic thins as I drive closer to my destination. Only a bright red convertible behind me and endless fields in front of me. It is painfully familiar: the bend in the road here, the turn there, the little red barn and the wind machine out there. My car slows and my heart beats faster as I reach the turn-off for the house. Closer and closer, and the sight of a towering building comes into focus, and I know what I will see, but nothing prepares me for the corpse standing where the house once stood, gaping holes where the windows once were, bare wood where the paint once was, cracked shingles, empty rooms, no front steps. No vegetable garden.

I feel no sadness. I never loved this house, I am sure of that.

I park the car on the side of the road and get out, closing my eyes and feeling the sun on my face. But then I hear the sound of high, whistling wind, like a tea kettle. Is someone else here? I inch closer to the house. There is humming.

“Hello?”

The humming stops, but the tea kettle sound does not. There is no response.

“Is anybody there?” I hoist myself up into the splintering door frame and peer into the parlor.

It is completely empty, furniture gone, except for an old woman sitting on the weathered floor, a wireless hot plate and a rusted tea kettle in front of her. She has smiling eyes, and they meet mine as I gaze into her wrinkled face.

“W-who--” I say, but other words do not come.

“Sit down, dearie,” the woman says. The tea kettle is shrill. She begins to hum again.

I sit. She rustles through a purple purse and pulls out two paper cups. She pours slowly and carefully.

There is something so familiar about the way she sits here, one with the house, in tune with the walls and floorboards, heart empty in the same places the house is empty.

My mother is not dead, my mother is far away, tucked away in her cozy room, yet I feel her ghost watching me with big, round eyes from across the tea kettle, a teacup against her lips.

“My name is Alice,” the woman says. “What is your story?”

“I’m Lily,” I say, but she shakes her head. I understand. She asked for my story, not my name. She asked like she knows me already.

“Um,” I continue, unsure how to begin, “I lived here once. A long time ago. I grew up here. I didn’t like it. I don’t know why I’m here.”

Alice looks at me. Finally, she smiles. “Nice to meet you, Lily.”

“You too. If I may ask, who are-- what is your story?”

“Can you guess?”

It is from the way she looks at the crumbling walls of the parlor, the way her hands brush the floor of the room, that I know.

“You lived here too.”

“Nineteen twenty seven.” Alice beams. “Fifty years in this place. Too many memories to reminisce about, thank goodness that old age gets rid of some of ’em.”

Alice reaches into her purse and pulls out a paper. It is a demolition notice, identical to the one I received, except for the name stamped at the top. She flattens it out on the floor.

She is smiling. How is she smiling?

“I have to go.” I stand. “Thank you for the tea.”

“Don’t you want to say goodbye?”

“Sorry. Goodbye.”

“Not to me.”

I leave the parlor and the floorboards creak underneath my feet. The door frame gapes open like a wound, quiet, chilling wind rushing through the skeleton house. I stop in the foyer. Alice’s gaze holds me in place.

Don’t you want to say goodbye?

I wonder if the dining room still has scratches on the floor from when my mother rearranged the furniture that one Christmas. Or if the paint is still stuck to the walls of my bedroom.

“I’m going upstairs,” I call.

“Be careful on the steps, dearie!”

I can feel Alice’s smile from here.

I reach out, feel the banister beneath my hands. Up and up I go. The shapes are the same as I remember. The curve of the railing, the angles of the hallway. The oval door knob of my attic bedroom.

I press my hand to the metal. The lock is gone, and the door creaks open by itself. There are patches of lilac paint. Half the floor is gone. But the little half-moon arch where my window once was is still there, the glass missing, but the view of endless fields and golden hills, the cloudless sky and bright sun remains.

I think of Alice, the life she must have lived, how she must now part with the place where she made so many memories, maybe with a husband, with children, maybe with a confused daughter who went forward and refused to look back. Suddenly I can see myself at six, playing with the dollhouse my father bought me; at ten, cuddling my cat Chester; at fourteen, bent over a desk with a pile of homework to finish; at sixteen seventeen eighteen and then I am leaving home for what I think is the last time, happy to say goodbye to my attic room.

I collapse on the floor where my bed used to be and allow myself to think of my mother.

The view through the little arched window is beautiful. Sunny in winter. It's probably still storming in Boston.

I go down the stairs as fast as I can. Alice is standing when I reach the foyer.

"Thank you," I call, smiling bigger than I have in weeks. She returns my smile.

I run to the car parked on the side of the road. Pull out my phone, dial my mother's number.

She picks up on the first ring.

"I'm home," I say, and the sound of her voice is the first sun after a winter's storm. My mother and I, we have never understood each other. But maybe we can begin to try.