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## Looking for Home

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# Looking for Home

The carpet is gone.

The realtor's heels click against the cherry-finished hardwood. "And this is the master bedroom."

"Beautiful floor." My toes budge at the tips of my sneakers. Once Ben and I buy the house, I'll slip across this room as if ice skating, gliding in sock feet with a wicker laundry basket on my hip. He'll kiss me, folding work pants in thirds and adding them to a pile towering at the foot of the bed.

"It's just hardwood, Nelly." Ben crosses his arms.

My parents had an orange carpet in the bedroom. I vomited on it once when I was four. Paper towels soaked up the raunchy mess. A stringy washcloth placed on the stain became a bridge to my mother. My feet squished against the damp spot, and I awaited her invitation. She lifted her arm and the covers rose. Once nestled beside her in the big bed, she pressed me into her chest. The sheets always smelled like a woman.

The bedroom is bigger than I remember. Maybe it's because of the missing carpet. There's space to walk around now that the dresser and vanity are no longer squished against the wall. It's enough space for Ben and me to share comfortably—something malleable to recreate and make our own.

At age eleven, I opened every jewelry box on my mother's vanity. While I sat on the ottoman, her studs blinked in my ears in the mirror's reflection. Lines of pearls bridged between my fingers. Her bra cups draped to my ribs. A stick of cherry-red lipstick sometimes found its way into my backpack in the morning, marking my face in the girl's bathroom before class.

I open Dad's closet, the biggest one in the house. It always served as the perfect hiding place.

My father would count down from thirty in the kitchen. I lost myself in his dress shirts and buried myself in a mountain of neckties.

His cologne still stings the space. I want to step inside, to sit in the corner again, and hide.

I pull the light string. Empty.

“Ben, look at all this closet space.”

“Might be big enough for your shoe collection.”

“We’ll have to tear down this wallpaper though.” The rose petal wallpaper is coarse under my fingertips. “I hate wallpaper.”

The realtor leads us back into the hallway. The previous owners hung new drywall and painted it red. My mother hated red. It made the house feel dark. This red was clean. There was no red on the molding—no red on the floor.

When I was seven, my mother brought home long rolls of striped wallpaper marked with a yellow clearance sticker. She sprawled out on the living room floor with a straightedge and a pair of scissors. The paper hissed as the blade dragged across. She bent around windows and outlets, cutting the perfect fit. There wasn’t enough to cover the whole room. It looked stupid, having one side of the room with the old paper and the rest new, but I didn’t want to paste over all the work I had done. I scraped bubbles out of the walls. My fingers got oily. It looked terrible.

“Down here we have a second bedroom.” The realtor opens the door and I’m taken back.

My childhood bedroom wallpaper is still there. Light green. I can still smell the vanilla bean candles on the walls.

I tug on Ben’s arm. “This room is gorgeous.”

“You hate wallpaper.”

“This is subtle. It’s nice.”

Ben shrugs.

There are still swirls in the plaster ceiling. I used to imagine they were galaxies. The tan carpet hadn’t aged in ten years.

I hid on the far side of my bed when he told me, clawing at carpet fibers. My father’s heavy feet hit each step. A steady hand on the comforter, he eased himself onto the floor beside me and told me we were moving. By we, he meant him and me. My room had to be clean so the buyers wouldn’t see my clothes scattered across the floor. The books had to be shelved. Anything I couldn’t find a spot for could be tucked into a dresser drawer. The house had to sell.

My father spent that afternoon in the garage painting slabs of white wooden molding. He carried the long beams up the stairs, the wood smacking the steps behind him. A cup of nails clattered against my homework desk. I held the molding against the wall, and he hammered it into place.

My bedroom was the first room in the house my mother renovated. She wanted me to have a nice space for myself to grow up in. While pregnant, she and my father patched the ceiling with plaster, wallpapered the walls, and

stapled down new carpet. I was born before the molding went up. No room in the house was ever finished.

Kneeling against the wall, my father threw down the hammer. It crashed against the carpet. The section of molding was too long for the wall. He'd have to pry it off, re-measure, and cut again.

"Your mother ruined this house."

I sat beside him, tracing his calloused knuckles under my fingertip. It was the first time I saw my father cry. When I hugged him, his shoulders drooped, like my mother had destroyed him. By then, he had already asked her to leave.

"Why don't we head back downstairs now?" The realtor gestures back to the door.

The brass knob lingers in my hand. I remember Mom lying in bed with me, playing the alphabet game. Apple. Blueberry. Cotton candy. Doritos. She'd ask if I wanted to play another round, this time coming up with different animals. I smelled lavender body soap on her skin. It was almost as if she didn't want to sleep in her own bed. Sometimes I woke up next to her.

I pull the door shut behind us.

"Only one bathroom?" Ben traces the porcelain tile under his fingers.

Brown water stains speckle the ceiling as if there had been a leak. I wonder if that was here before. Inside the medicine cabinet, I see faint dust marks from where pill bottles had sat for years.

Before the move, I tossed old prescription syrups from childhood ear infections in the trash. I packed my father's blood pressure medication in my shower bag. My mother left things behind—things my father and I would have to clean out of the house. Lipstick tubes. Allergy pills. Makeup remover wipes. I swiped her things into the trash. They were dirty. The new family shouldn't have to dispose of them.

"Yes, this is the only bathroom, but it has a shower and a bathtub, as well as plenty of storage and fans." The realtor gestures to the vents on the ceiling.

A single hair dangles from the fan.

My mother's hair marked its territory. Hair ties with her brown curls tangled in them. Hair snaked out of the bathroom drains. Hair tucked in the heat vents. I vacuumed what I could.

Maybe her hair is still here.

"One bathroom will be an issue if we ever have a family." Ben peeks in a towel cupboard.

"Let's see the kitchen next." I take his hand. The realtor is quick to take the lead.

The previous owners tore all the shelf paper out of the kitchen cabinets, but the border my mother stenciled around the room is still here.

"We'll have to paint over that." I point at the border. I want all traces of her erased. Paint over everything. Tear it all down.

“Small kitchen.” Ben’s hand skims my hip.

Mom elbowed the coffee maker when she rolled pie dough. Flour trailed behind the microwave. The clunky, wooden cutting board stuck off the edge of the counter. I sliced apples at the dining room table. Mom pulled out a folded apron from the buffet drawer. She looped the strings around my neck like threading a needle and knotted it at my waist like she was tying a corset. Mirroring the same motions, she secured an apron to her body.

“What made you choose this house?” the realtor asks.

“We haven’t chosen this house.” Ben squeezes my hip.

“Just looking for home.” I place my hand over his, finding the gaps between his fingers.

“It’s a great option. There’s a small grocery store just down the road. Great schools, friendly neighborhood.”

A real-estate sign pierced our front lawn where my mother and I used to have picnic lunches on a checkered blanket. Tuna sandwiches on white bread. Potato chips. Watermelon squares. I mowed the grass for Dad. The smell of gasoline and spring suffocated the air. The grass grew so long it masked the name of the realtor tasked with selling the property.

Stepping off the mower, I tugged at the sign.

*I have to mow here.*

“I hear her mom kisses *girls*.” Two girls stood on the sidewalk.

Teachers pulled kids aside at school and told them to take it easy on me. That I was from a broken home. Dad told me to ignore it. We’d be moving soon. I knew he heard the same whispers at work. It made me feel like I finally had something in common with him.

I ask the realtor, “Mind if we take a few minutes to talk?”

I pull Ben into the living room. We stand under the ceiling fan like it’s mistletoe. I remember my mother standing on the back of the couch to change the lightbulbs. My father scooped her off her feet and kissed her cheeks until she blushed. My mother had the prettiest smile.

I wonder who will change the lightbulbs—me or Ben? Unless we pull down the ceiling tiles and scrap the fan.

“What do you think?” I bounce on the tips of my toes.

“Serious?”

“It needs a little work, but I can see us making this a home.”

“A little work? Nelly, this house is ancient. The kitchen needs a whole remodel, there’s wallpaper everywhere, and the master bedroom is tiny.”

I wonder how we can arrange the bedroom to make it different from my parents. We can put the dresser next to the door, and the bed on the opposite wall. I can’t imagine having an orgasm in the same space my mother did.

“What about the house in Hannibal? That one was beautiful—modern and well-kept.” Ben leans into me, kissing my hairline. “I don’t think we’re going to be happy in this house.”

I wasn’t happy. I pushed everything off the kitchen counter. The floor was littered with bruised apples and dusty flour. I took a bite out of an apple and spit it at her.

“Nasty dyke.” I pulled my apron strings and tossed that at her, too.

My mother wiped the chewed piece of apple off the front of her apron. “Nelly...”

I rub Ben’s forearms, pinching the sleeves of his shirt. “It just needs some extra love. We have that. We can fix this.”

“It’s going to skew our budget. I’m sorry.”

Tears prickle my eyes. My parents and I sprawled across the living room floor, a Monopoly board between us. Bills of all colors tucked under the cardboard. My mother and father went back and forth; Dad pleading for Park Place, Mom eyeing Marvin Gardens. I bought the railroads and charged them every lap around the board.

“Sweetie?” Ben closes me in a hug. I look out the back door, where her garden used to be. She had watchful gnomes scattered in the dirt. They’re gone now.

“It reminds me of home.” I sniffle.

“You hated home.”

“I hated my mother. I never hated home.”

Ben traces my arms, rubbing my shoulders. “Ever since your mom passed, you’ve been obsessed with finding the perfect house, and you settle on this?”

“It’s cozy.”

“It’s falling apart.” Ben holds my hand. “We need a fresh start. Leave our pasts behind. We can create something new that’s all ours.”

“I’m not good with change.”

“We can be ourselves, but in a new place. We’re looking for a forever home. We’ll never have to move again.”

“Yeah.” I nod. “You’re right.”

Ben wipes a tear from my eye. He studies the black smudge on his fingertip. “You wearing mascara today?”

I nod.

“It’s pretty.” Ben cups my cheek and kisses me. “I’ll let the realtor know.”

I sigh. “Okay.”

Ben walks into the kitchen. I go the other way, into the dining room. I sit on the floor against the wall staring at the empty paneling.

My mother always left a tin tray lined with a paper towel and a tower of Oreos on the table when I got home from school. Some classes I only had

every other day, and rather than watching a kid toss paper wads at a proctor for forty minutes in study hall, I came home early some days.

That day there were no Oreos on the table. With no sign of my mother, I took the whole package of cookies upstairs to watch TV while I finished my biology homework. The plastic crinkled. A cookie crunched between my teeth. Noises bubbled from my parents' bedroom.

Poking the bedroom door, I found Mom pinned to the sheets by a woman. The woman's hair masked my mother's hips. Mom's mouth opened and released little cries.

As a child, I watched my mother lather creamy lotion across her olive skin, careful attention to the creases: her armpits, the space between her toes, the folds of her neck. She'd pump more into the palm of her hand and share with me. I wanted her figure to mold the shape I would grow into.

But I didn't want to become her—to become this.

Mom latched onto my eyes. She squirmed under the woman, masking their bodies behind the sheets.

I ran down the steps and sat on the dining room floor, under the table. This was another one of my common hiding spots. I'd hug the center support with my legs wrapped around it so my mother and father wouldn't notice me at a walk-by glance. I wonder what happened to our dining room table after the move.

"Ready to go?" Ben caresses my arm, pulling me from the memory.

"No."

"Sweetie..."

"We have to fix this house."

On that old paneling, Mom pounded nails into the board and displayed our family portraits. A photographer followed our family around a field behind Mendon Ponds in muck boots and a hoodie. My mother burned curls into my hair. She twisted her own hair into rings too. The photos were perfect. We were the perfect family.

"I'm sure another family will buy this house. It'll be a terrific home, but it's not for us."

Ben holds out his hand, towering over me.

I push myself off the floor, disappearing through the house. Up the stairs. They still creak. Into my mother's bedroom. The master bedroom. It's not theirs anymore. None of this is hers.

I open the closet door and crawl inside. The carpet burns my knees again. Mom used to crawl in here, too. I haven't outgrown it.

Maybe I didn't hate Mom. Maybe Dad taught me to hate Mom.

I didn't pray beside my mother's open casket. Old men shook my hand and squeezed too tight. *Sorry for your loss.* They were a few years too late.

It was my mother's girlfriend, Suzanne, who told me the house was on the market again. She wore black, plucking cubes of cheese off the end of a toothpick, red lips staining the wood. I wondered if she called herself a widow now, but I didn't ask. She and my mother wanted to buy it back, she said, before Mom got sick. I wanted to know what mom left behind in this house.

"Nelly? What are you doing in here?"

"Hiding." I hug my legs to my chest, the sharp scent of cologne stabbing my nose. "Come in."

"You can't be serious."

I pat the space beside me.

"But what about the realtor?"

I rub the carpet, as the heat sparks from the friction. She can't stop us. This is my house.

Ben rolls his eyes and climbs into the closet beside me. His hip pokes against mine. His legs can just barely lay straight, toes tapping against the opposite wall. His arm crams beside mine, and as if by instinct, he places his arm over my shoulders scrunching us more into one another, as if the closet was closing in on us. I swing the door shut.

"Nelly, why are we—"

"Shh!" My finger presses against my lips.

His voice shifts to a whisper. "Why are we in here?"

"Can't you imagine it? Playing hide and seek with our kids someday. Scrunching together into this closet..."

"Most houses have closets."

"But not like this one."

"It's not even that big, Nel. We barely fit." He scooches back against the wall of the closet, his hip crashing into mine. "And it smells like old man."

"It's cologne, Ben. Try it sometime."

"Why are you being so stubborn?"

"I'm not stubborn." I bite my lip, inhaling Dad's scent. "My parents and I used to play hide and seek all the time when I was growing up. I want to have those kinds of memories with our kids someday."

"We barely fit in here as it is." Ben squeezes my shoulder. "I would hide beside the washing machine instead. More leg room."

"Maybe they'd find me first and pull me around the house to look for you."

"You better not tell them my best hiding spot."

I pinch my fingers together, and drag them across my lips like a zipper.

"We can play hide and seek in a newer house," Ben says. "One where the floorboards don't creak. Creaky floorboards give away hiding spots."

"So do peeking children."

"What?"

“I’m ready to look at other houses.”

Ben smiles, squeezing my thigh. He grips the molding along the door and propels himself out of the closet. He’s too much of an adult to crawl out like I do. He offers me a hand, and I stand.

“Why the sudden change of heart?” he asks.

“Don’t you know me at all?” I kiss his cheek. “I hate wallpaper.”