

## HOME

by

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SNOW FELL SOFTLY on a late November evening in Michigan, quiet and without fuss, as though sneaking in to surprise everyone with slippery sidewalks in the morning and driveways in need of shoveling. The house was dark, save the lone ghostlike glow of the lamp beside my bed. I'd just given up trying to read and was ready to slip into pre-sleep thoughts about the day, the kinds of thoughts that spill over each other such that, as time passed, you wouldn't quite know if you'd actually thought about anything. And sleep—like the snow outside—would slowly and quietly cover you, and you'd be thankful for not having to be in control of anything.

The phone rang.

“Nick?”

I pulled myself from the half-sleep that had settled on me. “Hi, sis. I . . . I was just going to bed.”

There was a pause—one of those pauses indicating something not so good. The last time I got that kind of call was from my partner, who was away at a conference: *I have something to tell you*. That's how he eased into the end of our relationship. *I have something to tell you*.

“What's up?” I asked.

The years had not mellowed my sister's bluntness. “Mom died.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose and tightly shuttered my eyes.

“Aunt Chris was there with her.” My sister's voice was controlled, even. “She's the one who called me.”

I wasn't sure what to feel. My mother had been sick for some time. On my last visit, the cancer had already spread to her brain to choke away her sense of time and space.

“Johnny, I'm glad you're here,” she'd said to me, calling me by her youngest brother's name. Johnny had been dead for twenty years, another

victim of cancer. Why had she conjured him instead of any of her other thirteen siblings?

“I’ll check on flights first thing in the morning,” I said to my sister. “Love you.”

“Love you.”

I hung up. I turned off the lamp and looked out the sliding door of my bedroom. As dark as it was, I could see the faint outline of snow falling. I thought how wonderful snowflakes were, how they were nature’s perfect six-sided creations gently dropping from the clouds. And I thought how snow could make the bleakest landscape glisten with white beauty as a morning sun broke through clouds. Then I thought how we all could become snowflakes when we died. After our last breath, flesh and bone release molecules, and the light ones—the single and newly liberated H<sub>2</sub>Os—rise in the air. Some drift and move sideways, but others keep rising and rising until they mingle with the cold upper troposphere thousands of feet above. They join others to form delicate, frozen crystallites, and then gently, ever so gently, spiral their way back down to cover roofs, to cling to pine needles, to land on people’s tongues.

As I turned into my pillow and closed my eyes, I wondered how many people had landed on my tongue on any winter day.

I HAVE OFTEN thought of life as rooms in a house. As the years advance, we move from chamber to chamber. We close a door, and the hinges creak to let us know we are leaving one space and entering a new one. Some rooms are warm with rich paneled walls, buttery leather sofas, and crackling fireplaces. Hundreds of books may line shelves, and lamps may cast golden glows in the corners and onto the ceiling. Other rooms are cold with yellowed wallpaper and baseboards saddened by scuffmarks and chipped paint. A musty smell hangs in the air and enters your lungs as you pace in circles because there is nowhere to sit, no place to stop and rest.

As I sat on the plane, sipping chardonnay and catching glimpses of others in the first-class section, I thought of the rooms that made up my childhood and how I was happy to hear the hinges creak when I turned eighteen and left for college. I couldn’t remember a time when my parents didn’t argue, didn’t fight, didn’t use their fists and hands on each other. One time my father hurled a glass coffee pot. My mother dodged, but it smacked against a kitchen cabinet and sent a shower of shards in all directions, like exploding shrapnel. I screamed and my sister grabbed me, pulling me into the living room, spinning me around to see if I’d been hurt. I had no

wounds—no external wounds—so she pulled me by my five-year-old hand into the bedroom and told me to stay, then closed the door behind herself as she ventured back into the war zone. Of course, I heard more fighting, more yelling, my sister pleading, until the back door slammed and the car engine fired up—the crunch of gravel in the driveway telling me that someone was leaving. I crawled into bed and curled up. I prayed to the Virgin Mary as I'd been taught by my grandmother, saying Hail, Mary after Hail, Mary, finally drifting into the chaos of pre-sleep thoughts until dreams took me to rooms in other people's lives.

I landed in San Jose and picked up my rental car. I'd already called my sister and she gave me the mortuary information in Santa Clara. It had been three decades since I'd left the South Bay and, on the drive, I felt out of place. It was home but yet it wasn't. It reminded me of the time I'd run into my ex after not seeing him for almost fifteen years. He'd slid onto the stool next to me at a hotel bar, and when I heard my name, I turned. At first, I wondered who he was, taking in the circles under his faded blue eyes, the pronounced crow's feet, and the protruding gut. As the realization settled in, I said, "Oh, hi, Tim," and a singular question occupied me while we drank wine and pretended to be friends: This was the man I had loved for so many years and who had left me for a twenty-two-year-old?

Navigating the streets of Santa Clara, I felt like I was sitting at that bar, turning to find something barely recognizable. This was the town where I'd grown up, the place that had claimed me for so long, but it had changed. The street names were the same, yes, but some had been widened, even to boulevard status, and long gone were the orchards that once dotted the valley. Instead, buildings, malls, and mile after mile of asphalt and concrete carpeted this once agricultural part of the Bay Area—and as I took it all in, I felt alien, and I wondered what it was like for kids growing up here now, in this urbanized and push-and-pull city.

When I arrived at the funeral home, my sister was standing outside the entrance. I didn't know she'd taken up smoking again, thinking her addiction had been vanquished some ten years before. She threw her cigarette down and crushed the butt under the toe of her Nike running shoes, then waltzed toward me with that walk that our mother would not-so-teasingly describe as a truck driver's gait.

"No delays?" she asked as she embraced me.

"Nope. The weather cooperated and here I am."

She looked me up and down, studying me, to see if I'd changed from the last time we'd seen each other. "You need to come home more often."

"This is not home." I tried to sound neutral but I'm sure just a bit of argument leaked through the words. She ignored it if it had.

“You ready?” I nodded. “Come.” She hooked her arm into mine and led me inside.

In spite of my age, I’d only been to two funeral homes before. When I was eight years old, my mother insisted that I accompany her to the funeral of a young girl who had been killed by her own father and his friend, both of whom had escaped from prison. During a ransacking of the girl’s house, she and her mother arrived and the two men—high on who knows what combination of drugs, booze, and pure malice—strangled the mother and ran a barbecue fork through the girl’s throat. As I looked at her coffined body dressed in a white communion gown, I realized she was about my age, and it horrified me that I could be lying there, that I could die at my age. For weeks, I couldn’t shake the image of that girl from my thoughts, and I began to wonder when I might die, and how it would happen. Would, I, too, get skewered on a barbecue fork? Eventually, the image crept away to live in some dark recess of my mind, and I stopped thinking about death, but I never set foot in a funeral home again—except when my father died.

We spoke with the director who assured us that our mother was being well cared for, and when I reminded him that she was dead and not sick, he backtracked and said, “We are properly preparing her for the ceremony.”

I turned to my sister. “Ceremony?”

“Yes. It will be just us. And Aunt Chris.”

“But I thought she wanted to be cremated.”

“She did. But you can still have a ceremony.”

I didn’t think it would be much of a ceremony with only a handful of people present. My mother was estranged from her siblings, except Chris, her penchant for fighting not being confined to her relationship with our father—and he had died many years before. He’d hanged himself from a patio rafter during one of their brawls as she taunted him. “I dare you! I dare you!”, him sitting there, the noose dangling from above like a partially coiled boa waiting to slip around its prey. He scrambled up onto the picnic table, grabbed the noose and pushed his head through. He shouted, “Look what you make me do!”, and he leapt from the table. I had been watching from a seated position on the lawn, not believing anything would really happen, that this would end like all other fights with one of them storming off. I charged and grabbed his legs to hoist him, to defy gravity, defy the rope. I was only ten and not strong enough.

“Let him go,” my mother said.

I screamed and swung at her. She slapped me. By the time my sister ran from the house to see what the fuss was, my dad was limp like a wilted leaf ready to drop from a tree limb. When the police came, we told the story my mother had sworn us to: that we found him dead.

WE FINISHED PLANNING with the director, setting the ceremony for two days later, and my sister and I headed for a local bar. I eyed her over my martini, taking in her sixty years, five years my senior. Had we already lived that long? How many rooms had we passed through on our way to this day? Her hair had begun to pepper, and years of California sun, combined with her affinity for gardening, fishing, and camping, had parchmented her face so that she looked ten years older than she was.

“So how’s Dee?” I asked.

“Fine. She’s home doing the usual.” That meant my sister-in-law was busy cleaning and organizing things in the house, her OCD not as pronounced as it once was but still present enough that not a speck of dust could be found in their house. “We have the guest room ready for you.”

I twirled the stem of my martini glass. “Jen, what are we going to do at the ceremony?”

“What do you mean?”

“Aren’t funeral services for celebrating someone’s life?”

She didn’t answer right away and instead took a sip of her wine. After a beat, she said, “I know.” She looked at me. “And I also know why you moved away. Why you’ve spent all these years somewhere else.”

I wondered if she really did know. After all, she had stayed. For some reason, she’d remained anchored to this town, to this state, to the rooms we grew up in. I glanced toward the large window overlooking the sun-spilt parking lot, the array of cars shooting slivers of light off polished chrome, people wearing sunglasses in late November. I thought of where I’d been the day before and how I wished it would snow in Santa Clara, cover everything in that brilliant fresh whiteness, make it all look different than it was. I would fall into it, make snow angels with my arms and legs.

I’d let the dead touch my tongue.

THE END