

Impermanence

by Sedona Skenderian

It sits on top of a hill. Once a dream was shared by two, a sketch was planned on a paper napkin taken from the café down the street. Among a bucket list of countries to visit and doodles of landscapes that one day aspired to become paintings, there was a sketch of a house. Rooms tailored to their dreams. A kitchen where they would cook dinner every night. A hallway where she could hang her artwork. A large front yard where their future children could play. Then suddenly it was reality. Its creators chose the spot specifically. A place where they met as teenagers. When they first saw each other, a warm summer wind blew that seemed to push them closer together. This became where they spent most of their time sitting in the long grass eating sun-melted chocolates and looking out over the town that rested below. This was the place where they could let their walls collapse. Now they could see the same view from their living room. The house watched them standing in front of it, their prideful faces reflecting off the window's glass like an image reflected off an eye.

For the house to be created, sacrifices had to be made. Large machines, ripping grass, moving dirt, and cutting down trees. By the time the destruction was over, the top of the hill lay flat, the dirt on which the couple used to lounge was carted away in one of the trucks, never to be seen by the hill again. Cement was poured (initials carved into them secretly), walls were lifted, and the roof was a hat placed on top to cover the house's head. Veins of electricity and plumbing were installed, and the construction was over just like that. The crew of construction workers packed up their stuff and left. All that remained was an empty house, a desecrated hill, and a young couple standing before it, seeing all the potential in the world. It was not long before layers of pastel colors dressed the walls and re-upholstered furniture filled the belly of the house. No space was left alone. Pictures filled the hallways, utensils crowded the drawers, and sounds drifted through

the halls: whether it be talking, music, or laughing. The newness of the house was a thrill, an inspiration. This was when the house's newly polished floors still sparkled, and the windows opened with ease. Tree saplings were planted, and flowers found homes near the front porch. The grass regrew, and a new kind of life, one that was well-manicured, returned upon the hill. The couple could feel it like the pulsing thrum of a heartbeat resounding through the house; this was a new beginning. They talked in whispers at night about their plans—how they would one day advance their careers and save up enough money to travel the world.

It was not long before two voices turned to three, and three into four. The house extensions were added, and travel funds were depleted. New rooms to be filled with the happiness of toys, the sound of bedtime stories at night, flashlights under the covers, and lullabies when other attempts at sleeping couldn't be found. Shaky family portraits were drawn on the wall with every writing utensil that could be thought of, sometimes in plain sight where they were washed off immediately. At other times it was in secret corners or behind furniture where no one could find it. Soccer shoes, small bikes, the dragging of chairs to the living room to make forts, and the uncut nails of dogs scraped the floor leaving permanent marks. The floors were still bathed and continued to shine despite the damage. Outside a fence was built which kept numerous amounts of toys from spilling out, encapsulating the house in its world. Despite the chaos, the house's shutters seemed to smile with the joy that filled it within.

When the children were put to bed at night, the couple would sit in the living room. They had placed a couch in the exact spot where they used to picnic—or so they believed that it was the exact spot—and would talk for hours until they went to bed. She would say, "I wish I had more time for painting." And he would reply, "I wish I had less time at work." Yet both would still think, *But I am content with the life I've built.*

Even after the couple went to bed and no one was awake, the house was never quiet. The soft sounds of snoring filled the rooms, the tick of the clock in the living room, and the trickle of water from the automatic dog feeder never left the space silent. If one was quiet enough, they could hear the house breathing.

The once-paper white doorframes had been marked with lines labeled with names and ages. Over the years they progressively worked their way up the doorframe until one day, they stopped. The toys slowly disappeared, turning into computers, phones, and clothes. The walls never saw writing on them again. The house was once again clean. Not as clean as when it was first moved in, but cleaner, nonetheless. The noises lessened, and more doors were closed. Music still played and people still laughed, but the sound was muffled by the walls. The couple—who were no longer young—sat downstairs on their couch less and less. Both worked more now. They walked about the house with tired eyes and aching backs.

The number of people dwindled from four to three, then from three to two. And then it was as it originally had been, the couple and the house. Though much had changed. The floors were clouded with dirt that never seemed to resist the once-persistent washing. The floorboards creaked as one walked on them, just as the couple's joints creaked when they went to sit down. The door hinges squealed when opened or closed. The couple's backs were warped as was the roof from the rain and snow that it had experienced over the years. The two hobbled throughout the house. They no longer left very often. They sat on the couch watching TV together, yet they were miles apart.

The children came back every so often to visit. They would bring other people, friends, girlfriends, husbands, and children. During these times, spirits ran high. The faded colors of the wall glowed once more, and the space was filled with chatter and noise. The couple stood up a little straighter and they smiled a little more. The floorboard squeaks were more like cries of joy. These times were brief. Guests stayed no longer than a couple of hours. They would leave, and the sun would set. The house would be a little emptier, with both people and items that the kids had forgotten to take with them when they moved out. It was as if the tide had receded, taking

away all the pretty shells that it had brought with it. It was only after these visits that the couple would talk, their future becoming something of the past. She would say, "We needed to work more, but we wanted to travel."

He would reply, "We were fools. There was no time for that."

"We have time now."

"Not enough."

Then one day it all ended. The woman was in the kitchen washing the dishes when she suddenly froze. She clutched her heart and collapsed. It was a slow and painful descent, every second taking a thousand years to pass. The house groaned as a strong wind blew over it. The woman lay on the floor, no longer moving or breathing. It was not until the man came downstairs to watch the television that he found her on the floor. The sink was left running, and tears overflowed from the basin onto the floor. It left a puddle around the woman that wet her clothes and hair. The man bent down to hold her as fast as his bad limbs would allow it. His scream would be the loudest sound that the house would ever hear. An ambulance came and took the two away. For the first time, the house was alone.

It sat atop the hill, waiting, watching. Dust collected on the surfaces, food molded in the fridge, and cobwebs grew in the corners. A few weeks passed and people entered the house again. It was the couple's children who were now much older than their parents were when the house was built. As they walked around the house, their footsteps were the only thing that could be heard. They solemnly marked things with sticky notes, blue for one child, and red for another. Then, a day later the movers came in taking furniture away one by one and loading it into their truck. The house was hollowed out, with nothing but memories in the form of dents in the wall and the secret crayon pictures that were revealed after the furniture was moved.

Yet, the house still sat, awaiting the return of its family. Weeks, months, then years passed. The windows grew dusty, then broken. People threw rocks at the windows, delighted at the sound of shattering glass and breaking spirit. They stood at the front door, daring each other to step into the mouth and try to find the spirit that supposedly lived in the house. They spray painted the walls with their names, climbed up the stairs into the attic, told

creepy stories, and ran away when the house let out a mournful cry as a gust of wind blew over it. It could not stand any longer.

Eventually, the roof collapsed, and animals came in and made it their home, leaving it messy. Plants grew into the gutters, vines climbed up the walls. The front yard became a wild jungle of trees, offspring of those that the couple had planted many years ago. The walls eventually crumbled and collapsed, and floors rotted. The plants reclaimed what was once theirs. All that one might see if they walked up that hill was the skeleton of a dream. However, when the wind blew just right and the leaves that settled on the foundation were disturbed in just the right place, two initials could be seen carved into the concrete, in the exact spot where a young couple used to picnic a very long time ago.