What I Left, Unknown

Barbara Cecelia Harroun

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What I Left, Unknown

One client chain smoked, her oxygen tank standing sentry at her stooped shoulder. Cigarettes and urine, so I breathed through my mouth as I did the assessment.

She could not tell me the day or month or year, but as she stabbed her butt out in the heavy glass ashtray atop her afghan covered lap, she called for her husband to help. When I explained he had died four years ago the grief swallowed her face, and she sobbed until I turned on her television to Maury and made her soup and a grilled cheese in a kitchen filthy enough to frighten me.

I was an hour behind by the time I left her asleep in her wheel chair, certain her last smoke was not smoldering. The trailer a tinderbox, and her isolation within it, haunted me.

I was 23. I knew nothing, nothing about the back roads that trailed like tributaries through rural poverty—houses within my own county made of plywood, insulated by newspaper.

Before cell phones, a son sat with a shotgun on his lap as I asked for his mother’s last bank statement. He snorted, and then motioned with his bald head toward the door. I drove, chain smoking, my hand shaking so bad the ash dropped in my flower-printed lap.

I was 24. I knew nothing, nothing. I bobbed my long, blonde hippy hair, and wore ankle length dresses and sensible shoes that lent me the air of a social worker. On the way home to my new husband, I would stop for booze and a fresh pack of smokes. Once home, before I did anything, I’d shower off the old people.

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Once I sat in my car, in the parking lot of the saddest nursing home in the county, weeping. Once he had played piano for silent films. In his tuxedo, his slicked back hair, he was more devastatingly beautiful than Valentino. He had shown me his photographs in a yellowing scrapbook. He had lived down the block from me, would place Strawberry candies into my palm and wink before walking me out. Dapper and quiet, a life of chosen celibacy,

he was now dying alone, too sick to answer any questions or place me. I sat in his foul smelling room on a hard backed chair, held his hand, then watched him sleep, seeing how he would look in two days upon his death. In my weeping, I mourned him, but I mourned even more that my parents would someday die, my husband, even the children we were imagining—we would all grow old, (if we were lucky), our bodies failing us, and we would die. I leaned my seat back, spent, and took a nap in early spring sunlight until a nurse knocked on my window, her cartoon scrubs absurdly cheerful, relief on her face when I came fully awake, and reassured her I was fine.

I was 25, and I knew nothing, nothing about how to explain that I loved driving farther out, on a road no one knew existed, around a bend of white gravel, where a fog lifted in the sultry August around me; and then beneath a massive tree that seemed to bend down to protect a small, white cottage, so kept and tidy

I would slow to blink, look again, blink—
the glider swing, measured flowers, an old push mower leaning against a pristine shed, so crisply white. It was a pleasure to look at, to walk through the deep silence that lived there with her, my client.

I felt a longing and a loss before she stepped to the front porch. Her gray cotton dress pressed with an iron she heated on her ancient stove. Her yellow white hair braided, then bunned tightly under her koppa. Her bare feet naked and clean. Blind and alone, she offered me respite in the cool dark of the drawing room, well water in an aluminum cup, so cold my eyes
watered with gratitude. Grateful too that she could not see me, so moved by her gift. She touched my face with such gentle grace. I would close my eyes, silent as she saw me. And when I revealed

I was leaving, going back to school, she clasped her hands in her lap, and smiled, saying plainly, “I am so pleased for your happiness.” Her own tears tracking down the fine creped wrinkles of her face.

On the porch we held each others’ hands, in the way I had only ever done with my mother. Perhaps she prayed for me, and then I let go, stepped off the porch, already gone.

I was 25 and knew nothing, nothing but that my skin was too thin, I had no professional distance, and this place and its people were my own and I had to leave them.