The Old Man and the Magnolias

A house crumbles atop a small hill in Carrboro, North Carolina. Its roof bears two holes so massive that, when viewed from the proper angle and at the proper time of year, one can observe a sunrise between them. Years of rain have thus seeped through its beams, halted only at the partially-exposed brick foundation. Its presumably once-terracotta hued paint job has faded to a mere pale pink in the harsh southern sun. The scaffolding, bound to the building like a lattice cage, would seem to indicate that someone surely must intend on fixing the house. But a closer look reveals the construction to be just as aged and weathered as the walls themselves.

Only the pristine wooden fence surrounding the lot suggests that all is not abandoned. Unlike everything else, it has been maintained immaculately.

I pass this house every day, and have wondered about it for some time. Town records inform me that it was built in 1917, back when the Alberta Cotton Mill was ostensibly Carrboro's *raison d'être*. Carrboro was the wrong side of the tracks in those days; an embarrassing working-class little sister to the Carolina Blue-blooded Chapel Hill. Many of the old mill houses north of Main St. are now restored, or else replaced by million-dollar single-stories. People up thoseways own their homes, and keep them beautiful. South of Main, where this house is, was only later developed through. Disparate renters have since settled: grad students, immigrant families, service industry workers. I find myself in the latter category, tending bar at a restaurant that charges *market price* for fish and garnishes everything with pea shoots. The restaurant resides within the former cotton mill, which was converted into a shopping mall in the 1970s.

Sometimes I see an old man tending to the house. He seems to manage the property, but only in name. Despite all the scaffolding and sawhorses, I have discerned only two goals in him: one is to wage merciless war against the magnolias that loom like doubt above the lot; the other, to fortify the defenses of his rotting plot of land. The first goal most often takes the form of shuffling fallen leaves and seed pods on the sidewalk into piles, but occasionally involves tactical strikes with chainsaws on ladders. The second, as it turns out, tends to be a result of the first.

One of the magnolias struck back last week. The old man must have been pruning recklessly and fell an ill-chosen limb, crushing a six-foot wide segment of the fence and severely compromised the integrity of the next one down. I only caught the aftermath; the thin layers of magenta paint contrasted against splintered boards settled around a single victorious branch. It looked like a crime scene. Two days later, though, all the debris was gone, and the fence was repaired entirely. The new segment was even painted the same magenta as the rest of them, albeit a hair brighter. The old man had returned the fence to its former glory in the breath of a weekend, and everything was precisely how it used to be—save a newly disarmed magnolia.

The holes in the roof, of course, remained.

Fixated on this house and the old man tending to it, I began to ask around. Many folk knew the place I was talking about, but no one had any answers. *It's been like that for as long as I can remember,* they'd say. Even the older townies, who have lived here for decades, could only muster something along the lines of, *it used to be nice and now it isn't*. Carrboro's Register of Deeds Mark Chilton connected me with a former owner of the house, a then-baker in her then-20s who maintained it well with some friends around the turn of the century. She told me that the roof was in need of work when she owned it, but given the manner of its three-layer construction, that work was outside of her skill set and budget. She therefore sold it in good faith to the current owner in 2001, believing he would make the necessary improvements.

The roof bore no gaping holes then.

As to the ultimate intentions of the old man, however, she could only speculate. Indeed, everyone I asked wondered what was going through his mind, and each had their own theory. One speculated that his obsession with the fence and trees was driven by liability issues; that the house could elude the designation of public nuisance through its inaccessibility. Someone else postulated that he may have had a property war with another prospective buyer, and that his ownership and demarcation thereof now supersede any genuine interest in the house itself. A friend who landscapes suggested that the cost of repair must be greater than the value of the house as a foundation, and that maintaining the fence and trees develop the value of the property irrespective of the building itself, which passes the burden of demolition onto whoever buys it next. Others still deemed him mad, entirely blind to the futility of his enterprise.

Most inevitably compared him to Sisyphus, and it's not a stretch to see. The old man toils endlessly with no measure of advancement. Nothing seems to change. It can all seem cruelly absurd from outside the fence. I, however, resist this comparison, because Sisyphus was not free. He was condemned to his task by Zeus; his labor means nothing because he did not choose it and does not believe in it. I can not conceive of the old man as condemned—even if his house is. His dedicated care for the ever-pristine fence and ruthless attacks on the colossal magnolias must have been chosen freely, with absolute intention. Why else would he rise early on Sundays and labor with the devotion of a zealot?

Instead of Sisyphus, then, I see Abraham in the old man. I think he believes, in spite of all the decrepit evidence available to him, that this house will—and indeed must—one day be restored. The holes in the roof mark it a sacrifice, but he himself can not deliver it from the altar. He knows that that is impossible. But in that impossibility, there still lives—for him alone—the shimmering promise of a house once more a home. Marrow will be returned to each beam; gashes made shingle-skin once again. The magnolias will wither to saplings. The sidewalk will be clear of leaves forevermore. Divinity must intercede at some decisive moment, just down the line, yet to be determined; all he can do in the meantime is consecrate the site of the future miracle. So he mends the fence and prunes the trees so that all may know the line at which ground has thus been hallowed.

Admittedly, it's an imperfect analogue. The sacrifice of Isaac was to be quick, and the sacrifice of the house is more of a slow decay. I can think of no lamb to take its stead, though a handful of properties around it have been razed and replaced by opulent ugly mansions in recent years. Unlike the ease of calling him Sisyphus, I concede that this is all a stretch. Still, the house never seems to roll down the hill. So as I open and close the restaurant, and as the immigrants up the street open and close the kitchens, and the grad students next to them receive and return and receive papers for grading, I decide that I cannot bear to read another easy Sisyphus in town. He can be anywhere you look for him. It is endlessly preferable to imagine passing some Knight of Faith on my daily walks; to believe against sense that this man believes against sense that his house will one day be whole again.

I therefore sometimes imagine Carrboro fifty years from now, but just as the old man would see it. The house is, by that point, restored entirely; the trees kept timid at their defensive lines. Carrboro will have its way, and all other houses south of Main would be lavish and expensive and owned by their occupants, but this one will remain in its original mill-style flesh. As Isaac sired Jacob, father of the Israelites, so too will the house realize its birthright as the inexorable and essential link between the town of Carrboro as it is and why it was.

What will the mill-mall be then? Will Sisyphuses work there? Where will they live? Will anyone remember the trial of the house with the holes in the roof, and the Abraham of Carrboro willing to sacrifice it? Or how it was spared, returned its life, and chosen among all other mill houses to entrust with a blessing? In fifty years, could anyone recognize the memory of a miracle?

Coda:

I was walking into town when I came across the old man raking the leaves on the sidewalk. I removed my headphones and sunglasses and ball cap to telegraph respect, the way one might around a foreign dog. *Good evening,* I said, trembling. He raised his head and stared at me in silence. *Are you, uh, the owner of this property?* I asked.

Why? he retorted.

I'm just curious. I've always thought it was a beautiful plot and just had a couple questions about it.

What's your name? he asked, as if his inquiry was an accusation.

Benjamin, I said. *I live right down there. I walk by, like, every day.*

His tired eyes looked me up and down before fixing upon my own tired eyes once again. I should have figured that the man with the impermeable fence wouldn't take kindly to inquisitive parties.

Well, Benjamin, as you can see, I'm very busy, he said as he gestured to the seven or eight leaves he had pushed into a single sparse pile. The magnolias are only beginning to bloom at this time of year, so there's little to sweep.

I didn't mean any disrespect, I attempted to explain, but the old man just lowered his head and directed me forward on my prior path.

Have a nice night, man, I uttered with a hollow wave.

I felt dejected and foolish until the moment I remembered that Derrida contended God's real test of Abraham to have been whether or not he could keep a secret. For him, that was where faith first entered the picture.

Of course he cannot tell me his reasons, I thought to myself. *That would surely make all of this meaningless.*