

A SORT OF HOMECOMING

by Lisa Jackson Tresch

My father was an odd shade of gray and sinking a little further each day into the depths of his recliner. He kept a pack of cigarettes nestled between the folds of his belly, and the television remote dangled between his stained fingers. He no longer needed to look down to know which buttons to push, which was just as well because his incessant fingering of them had rubbed away the numbers and letters.

The sun had hidden itself for almost four weeks, not even attempting to break out from behind the smoky, swollen clouds that settled a little lower every day. Sidewalks, rooftops and lawns of brown grass were buried and forgotten under a heavy wet topping of snow that refused to melt. At first we had watched for the sun and longed for it to emerge from its place of refuge, but as the days slowly passed, we accepted its absence with unconscious resignation. We no longer needed illumination as each of us began to slowly deteriorate within the walls of our home.

My mother plodded around with her broom and dustpan, scooping up tiny piles of dirt that the rest of us could hardly see. She muttered to herself about dirty floors and ungrateful families and the pain in her lower back. Her searching eyes would leave the floor sometimes to hone in on one of us, narrowing and staring us down until we looked away. It didn't seem to

matter that we all wore socks and almost never left the house. We were still responsible for the invisible trails.

My brother Truitt did leave the house once a week at midnight. My mother and I always stayed up late on that night, waiting up for him while he sprinted to the grocery store down the block like he was a wanted fugitive. He always returned with his face a shocking shade of red and his lips white and parched. My mother and her broom would trail after him uttering a string of one-word food questions: "Sausage? Noodles? Cheese crackers? Doughnuts?"

"Got it," he would mutter after each word, and we could still hear him answering her and wheezing heavily as he disappeared down the steps into the cold, moist basement.

My sister Ada spent her days behind her closed bedroom door writing letters to people we didn't know. She claimed that they were friends she had made two summers ago when she hoisted preschoolers into tiny helicopters at the amusement park. The job only lasted three weeks and I had never known Ada to be the kind of person who made friends, so I doubted her story. But on my way to bed each night, I stopped and leaned heavily against her doorframe and could hear her rocking chair squeaking and the intermittent rustle of papers. And she had once instructed Truitt to buy her flair pens and stamps during one of his midnight runs, but I never saw any of her letters leave the house.

I vacillated between feeling completely content and on the edge of hysteria. Every morning I sat with a purple ink pen and newspaper and ran my finger down every classified ad, decorating the page with circles and stars and checks. I then switched to a thick red marker for

ads that might be of interest to my father. There were always twice as many red marks, and I would lay the paper on his lap and shrug.

"Just in case," I would say in a casual voice.

He would mimic my shrug with a sneer, or sometimes just lay the paper beside the chair and flick cigarette ashes on it until my mother rushed in cursing, aiming her dustpan at the mess like a weapon. I never saw him make a phone call during the month we were trapped together, but every night, he stood up and stretched, looked around the living room with disgust and said, "Wish there was a damn job to be had." Then he would shake his head and plop back down, still ignoring the red circles.

We reunited that winter, the five of us thrown back together in that house as if we had been caught trying to escape. My sister Ada had hurried away eight months earlier, claiming to be deeply in love with a middle-aged man named Fenn who painted portraits in his mother's attic. He came in the middle of the night and honked for her and she stumbled out the door with wearing a nightshirt and no shoes. In less than a year she came back home with her hair dyed pink and bruises in a variety of colors across the backs of her legs.

My brother Truitt flunked the three classes he was taking at community college and his announcement that he was quitting school came on the same day my father was finally fired from the car dealership for years of rolling back odometers. They were disgraced by each other and hadn't exchanged words or passed glances since Christmas. Truitt lived in the basement and played out the role of a deprived intellectual by smoking a pipe and reading my mother's old,

thin yellowed mystery novels until morning when he would turn out the light and sleep until dusk.

My reason for returning had not been fully uncovered by anyone in my family, and I was doing my best to keep it that way. The truth was that I had quit my job months ago at the video store in a neighboring town to attend the police academy. I have long since forgotten who I was trying to impress, but the academy quickly sized me up as an underweight, skittish candidate and politely handed me a list of other possible career options. I decided that I would move back home, maybe join the volunteer fire department and try to gain enough weight to start over at another police academy. The idea fueled me all the way back, but soon my enthusiasm and motivation quietly receded and I resorted to lying. I told them, with an overdone amount of drama, that the video store had burned to the ground and included exaggerated details about melted movies that had formed into tiny charred mounds across the concrete floor. The story grew bigger every time and I began to enjoy telling it, even when no one was listening. In fact, my picturesque descriptions had been wasted on my family. They didn't seem to care why I had returned, or why any of us were here. We just huddled in our separate corners while the snow fell and the ice gathered, and the clouds rolled along in the sky. We felt the wind blow through the cracks around our flimsy doors and windows, and we listened to the snow crunch outside beneath the tires of the busses and cars that passed unseen. It had been twenty-six days since the sun had peeked out from around the clouds and I was beginning to feel like we were hidden

under a giant, dirty blanket. On the twenty-seventh day, I actually commented to my mother that I was feeling a little unhealthy. "Doesn't the sunshine have some important vitamins in it or something?" I asked her. I was hunched over the kitchen table with my newspaper and pens.

"Nonsense," she said, a stubby cigarette dangling from her parched lips. For an instant I saw a dreamy look cross over her face and then disappear. "It makes me think of London. You know the sun never shines in London and those people are as healthy as us right here."

I looked up in time to see her lighting a fresh cigarette off the butt of her last one as she stared out the window. She had never been out of the state of Connecticut, but I tried never to argue with my mother. She enjoyed it too much.

"I guess it probably has to shine sometimes over there," I said casually.

"Never," she said, jerking her head to look at me with a challenging stare.

I watched her take a long drag off her cigarette and nod at the paper.

"Find anything?"

"Maybe," I lied.

Her upper body stretched forward until she was so close to me I thought I could hear her jaws crack as she spoke.

"Let me tell you something Charlie. You find that man a job and get him out of this house or I'm gonna kill you both." She had planted her palms on the table in front of me and I leaned back away from her and breathed in her smoke.

My family had never been close, and now that I was grown I had come to believe that underneath the facade we were all just five people who had been thrown together by the consequence of biology, unable to work out the essentials that went along with it. In younger days, we had the luxury of busyness to keep us a safe distance from each other. My mother had a lifelong obsession with cleanliness, although her efforts at controlling the clutter only seemed to make it worse. "Talking about it and actually *doing* it are two different things," my father said to her one night as he surveyed the chaos around him. And then she poured a cup of hot coffee over his supper plate, giving him yet another excuse for spending even more of his time at Jerry Gett's Used Car and Truck Emporium, making deals and enemies as he meandered around the lot, slick-tongued and sweating. Truitt and I were each loners in our own home, mostly because my mother constantly complained that by growing up in a family of six girls, she was doomed to be a lousy mother for boys. We shared a room, but sat on our beds with our backs to each other. I honed my isolationist skills at home, then took them out into the world like a escaped quarantine victim while Truitt dived into crowds and gorged on relationships, eventually suffocating every friend he made by hanging on to them like he was falling.

Ada should have enjoyed the advantage of a relationship with my mother, but it never transpired. Battles between the two of them loomed on the horizon every day and on those evenings my father was home, he waged war on their shouting by continually turning up the television volume. On the eve of Ada's graduation, my mother leaned over the sink, tears plopping steadily on the green porcelain and lamented about her failures in raising her daughter.

She didn't know Ada was standing in the doorway watching, and when my mother turned around she gave a tart smile and fluffed her frizzy hair.

"Don't worry about me, I'll be alright," she said, breezing past Ada with an anguished sigh. During those shadowy winter days we each claimed our corners of seclusion, although I was the only one who meandered around without an appropriate outlet for my unhinging. I felt caged in the house, but I was in no shape to leave. Truitt's grocery store trips caused me quite a bit of anxiety, and I always paced and smoked two of my mother's cigarettes during his absence. At the time, our behavior seemed perfectly normal, even our daily repetition of the same meaningless rituals and conversations. We were completely unaware of our own descent. It seemed that we had all come home to shrivel and collapse beneath the weight of a leaden sky.

On Sunday morning, the thirtieth day of our seclusion, someone knocked on our front door. My father turned down the television and snapped his head up with a frown, and my mother took a step back in horror.

"The house is a mess," she whispered gravely.

The three of us stood motionless, staring at the door. My father was sitting in his chair wearing dirty boxer shorts, tube socks and an unbuttoned dress shirt. My mother and I were equally ragged, she in an ancient brown velour housecoat and me in an undershirt and ripped sweatpants.

Ada cracked her door and peered into the hallway, her eyes wide with terror. Her pink hair was pulled up on top of her head and it emerged like a fountain, spilling out from the rubber band.

"Who is it?" she tried to shout in a whisper.

My mother waved her back into her room as she silently mouthed, "We don't know." Ada tiptoed back behind her door.

The nubby brown curtains on each window were pulled together and fastened with a safety pin, a ritual my mother performed every October in her perpetual quest to keep the cold winter air from seeping into our house. I stepped over to a window and separated the curtains a few inches with my fingers.

"It must be a neighbor," I reported. "There's no car outside."

"Keep your voice down!" my mother whispered.

At the sound of another knock, my father sat up in his chair, as if he was ready to pounce.

"You're not going to answer the door are you?" My mother pleaded, terror in her eyes.

He held up a hand for silence and leaned over in his chair, his face staring at the gold shaggy carpet.

"Are you going to be sick?" I asked, wondering if the sound of his retching would tip off the intruder that we were in the house.

"That curtain," keeping his hand close to his chest while he pointed, "isn't fastened very tight...and I think that from the angle of the middle of the porch... whoever is out there can see right through the crack... into *this* chair."

My mother let out a quiet little gasp and I heard Ada shut her door softly.

For the next three minutes, the only sound in the house was the frenzied squeak of Ada's rocking chair behind her closed door as the rest of us, fixed in place, barely breathed. Then we heard the sound of snow crunching under shoes on our porch steps. As the sound faded down the driveway I gripped the edge of the table, not taking my eyes off the door.

Suddenly Truitt surfaced from the basement and was looking at my father, whose face was still flushed from bending over in his chair.

"Who was at the door?" he asked. The smell of cigar smoke drifted up from below.

"They left," answered my mother quickly. She was still frozen in a mid-step position.

"You mean no one opened the door?" he looked at each one of us, including Ada, who had emerged from her room again and was standing in the hallway. I opened my mouth, but had nothing to say. At that moment, I couldn't think of a reason why we hadn't opened the door and greeted whoever it was standing on our front porch. Like sane people might have done.

"What are you a bunch of zombies?" Truitt said, jerking his head around to look at each one of us, waiting for us to say something sensible. He gave up and disappeared back down into the basement.

"He wouldn't have opened the door either," I said and wiped my sweaty hands on a dishtowel.

The next day the clouds were heavier and the color of the sky matched the dark circles under my mother's eyes. She was almost hidden behind a haze of cigarette smoke when I stumbled into the kitchen at eleven-thirty that morning. I had set my own record of having slept for fifteen and a half hours, and was still exhausted. We had all gone to bed around eight the night before, perhaps worn out from the excitement of the knock on the door.

"Afternoon," she greeted me sarcastically. She had gone so long without washing her hair that greasy half-curled clumps stuck out all over around her head. She didn't smell so good either. The dishes in the sink were stacked up from the endless meals of macaroni and cheese and Vienna sausages and I thought I saw the long tentacles of a cockroach disappear between two plates. My mother's dustpan was tucked under her arm and she looked right past me, her eyes webbed with tiny red blood vessels.

"How long have you been up?" I asked, opening a can of soda.

She shrugged and said, "Fifteen or twenty minutes."

As far as I could tell, my father had not started his day yet. At night, he slept in his recliner, and he was still there this morning, lying on his side with the remote clutched in one hand like it was a treasured toy. Drool was puddling under his open mouth onto the red fabric,

forming into a dark, wet spot that looked like blood. The top of his head was shining white and now matched the color of his face.

"I have my suspicions about who was at the door yesterday," my mother said in a voice filled with suspense.

"Who?"

"That tart up the street with the dog. She probably knows that your Dad lost his job."

"Why would she care?" I asked.

"I don't know. Some people just like to stick their nose in places it doesn't belong."

My parents had managed to live in the same neighborhood for thirty-one years without making a friend, an acquaintance or even an enemy. I shook my head and hovered over the want ads. I couldn't imagine why anyone would care whether my father sold cars or slept in his recliner for the rest of his life. He let out a snorting snore, as if to agree with me, and I tossed the paper toward his chair.

"Oh no you don't," my mother hurried over and snatched it up, carrying back to paper and smoothing it back out in front of me. "You find that man a job and get him out of this house. He's rotting in that chair. Can't you see that?"

I stood up and glanced over at him. The dark red puddle under his mouth was growing bigger and there were sweat stains under his armpits.

"Listen Ma, why don't you put on some clothes and get out of the house for a while?"

My mother disappeared behind a fog of exhaled cigarette smoke, a look of panic frozen on her face.

"What for?"

"Fresh air will do wonders."

"I got plenty of fresh air in here," she snapped. "You're sounding so energetic, why don't you get out there yourself."

I nodded. "Now that you mention it, I believe I will. It's about time. Do you realize the five of us have been hiding out in here for thirty-one days?" The reality of it hit me so suddenly that I didn't have time to squelch my words before they came out. "I'm getting disgusted with this place and the way we wallow around in here like we're trapped or maimed or something. Truitt's right. We're a bunch of zombies. We can't even answer our own door," I gestured around wildly, knocking over my empty soda can. I raised my voice over the sound of it bouncing across the rubbery linoleum. "This doesn't make sense. None of us want to be here, but we can't seem to leave. Somebody ought to be the first one to go."

I finished my speech and caught my breath. I felt winded. I couldn't remember when so many words had come out of my mouth at one time. My mother continued to smoke, the look of panic replaced with calm reserve.

"Go ahead," she smiled coolly and gestured at the door with a slow, sideways nod. "Get on out there."

"I just may do that," I nodded and gazed at the door for a moment as if I had already made the decision, then plodded down the hall like an old man and fell onto my bed. Just thinking about leaving made me tired. I closed my eyes and the faces of my family melted together in the darkness until they were each just circles, filled in with the bitterness of too many floundering starts and early failures. But that was what we expected from each other. To succeed in anything would be traitorous. We stood back and watched each other fall flat, then smirked and clucked our tongues with aloof disgust. It had taken twenty years, but I had finally gotten away from here and in the midst of that detachment I had been able to believe I could accomplish something that would make me feel like a normal person. Here, there were no normal people. I had returned home and taken a lingering drift deep into the arms of this miserable place and its inhabitants. Now I felt too drained to peel back the hands and crawl out.

I sat up on the edge of the bed and rubbed my eyes. Outside, the world was still turning. I started to lift up the curtain to look at the turning world, but instead stood and shuffled back into the kitchen where my mother had planted herself at the kitchen table, armed with the red pen. She was humming defiantly and rolling the soda can back and forth under her foot.

"I'm leaving tomorrow," I whispered. My father was stirring and she hummed louder for a moment, and then shrugged.

"Suit yourself. You don't even have to tell me where you're going."

"I'm going to go try to get my job back at the video store."

"Gonna be kinda tough working in that burned down building, huh?" she smiled a little, but I stared hard into her filmy gray eyes until she looked away.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"Do?"

"I mean, besides try to clean up this mess here," I gestured toward the dustpan in her lap, but she was watching my father. She suddenly sat up straight and calmly looked over at me. She picked a fleck of tobacco from her lip and said, "That's a lifetime job kid, don't you know that?" Then she resumed her humming.

It was midnight when I started packing and instead of turning on a light or folding my clothes, I wadded each piece and tossed it into the suitcase from my dresser drawers. I had just enough money for a bus ticket and my father had nodded absently when I asked him if he could have someone come tow my car to his old dealership. I told him to keep the money from the sale and expected to get some kind of response from him, but he just gave a slight one-shoulder shrug as he sagged lower in his chair.

I didn't tell Truitt or Ada I was leaving. I figured I would call them in a few days, but I doubted they would notice my absence. They would escape when Ada had written enough letters and Truitt had devoured all the mysteries in the basement. And then maybe the three of us would talk about these days we had spent under the dirty blanket, but I doubted that too.

I got up early the next morning and was surprised to see my father standing in the kitchen when I hauled my suitcase and backpack to the door.

"You didn't have to get up," I said.

He had changed his shorts, but he still wore the stained dress shirt and the tube socks. He was sipping coffee and blinking like it was the middle of the night.

"I got woke up," he mumbled.

"By me?"

He shook his head and pointed to the curtain that wasn't fastened completely. The one he feared the intruder could see through. From his vantage point in the recliner, he had been hit with the first ray of sunlight in thirty-two days.

"I couldn't sleep with that damn light coming in there," he said the word *light* as if he had been holding it in his mouth for days and couldn't wait to spew the filthiness out.

I nodded, and smiled.

"You know I won't be around anymore to read the want ads for you." My words sounded weak and unconvincing. I felt my stomach bounce.

Silence. He watched me carefully.

"Well?" he said.

"Well," I answered loudly, "I better get to the bus station."

I waved and he waved back, but it was more of a flick of his hand that said, "Go on, get out of here." He was already on his way to the bathroom by the time I stepped on the porch. I caught the door just before it closed and stepped back in. The television had been turned off, and without the shear blue light, the house was shrouded in a gloomy brown dimness. I leaned over to the curtain and released the safety pin. Dust flew as I pulled each panel back. I hurried to the other window and pulled the curtain back and more dust cascaded across the tiny kitchen. Now the house was swarming with tiny particles that danced and floated in the blinding bright room. The sunlight reflecting off the snow was clean and white and as it poured in, it illuminated the filth we had created while the sun had been hidden. There were stains and dried food piles along the counter, crumbs on the kitchen table and grime and squashed bugs on the floor that my mother had worked so hard to keep clean.

"On a sunny day," I said, only it came out sounding like my father's muttering, "The bus station is going to be crowded, and the traffic on the highway will be awful." I began to feel myself sinking and pulled the kitchen chair beneath me.

"Not a good day to travel," I shook my head and stared at my suitcase. The sun moved behind a cloud, then emerged even brighter, suddenly making the dingy rooms look whitewashed and clean. I closed my eyes but the glaring light became a pounding in my head that made the room spin. I stumbled over to the curtains and pulled them shut, fumbling with the safety pins with my eyes still closed. I fastened the panels together tight and then collapsed into my father's recliner.

"You'd be proud of me Pop," I mumbled when I heard him shuffle back into the room. "I fixed that curtain where you hardly know it's day out there."

-THE END-