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## The House of Spider Webs

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## The House of the Spider Webs

When Ellen remembers her childhood, she tends to see it in slow motion. Every action slows down to individual frames of movement viewed one at a time: a slide show of two children slipping on hardwood floors in their woolen socks and flannel pajamas, of her mother polishing the wooden panels of the house one small stroke at a time, and of the particles of dust streaming in the attic, highlighted by the sun coming through the two circular windows at either end. Each particle was a planet, part of a larger swirling galaxy of dust that would eventually settle onto one of many spider webs, sticking there invisibly, like a piece of a failed universe.

There are sounds in the scenes: small words like *love*, *orange*, *slide*, and *don't*. There is also the thankful laughter, the inevitable shouting, the suction of bare feet sticking to wet earth, and the sound of parents having sex on the living room floor.

The key grinds heavily in the lock. Ellen wraps her fingers around the brass door handle and feels the stick of the cobwebs that have gathered there. She pushes the door open and looks at the threads that float between her fingers in wispy trails that could be tricks of the light. Ellen is a student of light and shadow, two important elements in the composition of a superior photograph. Even now, she has her camera on a strap around her neck.

She steps inside as the door swings open; it hits the edge of the stairs. *A minor architectural flaw*, her mother always said. At the threshold, she snaps a picture of the foyer, undisturbed for over twenty years. *You could get a great price for that house*, says Henry, her real estate friend, *isn't it about time you let it go? No one would pay to live here*, Ellen always replies. If it weren't for the flash in the foyer, the clouded daylight streaming through the doorway would have been the only illumination.

She knows the living room lies in the darkness beyond the doorway light but she ducks into the kitchen first. Ellen raises the shades on the windows of the breakfast alcove, coughing on the dirt and dust stirred up by the sudden motion. The dust floats in the light, as it did in the attic, but this time it makes pictures. Ellen picks out individual frames from her memories, the way she and her brother made shapes out of the white clouds above their house when they were kids. There is an immaculate 1963 Buick Skylark in the kitchen like there was in the sky twenty-eight years ago. She takes a picture, even though she is the only one who will know exactly what it means. More windows are opened and more pictures taken before she moves through the kitchen to the dining room. Her fingers trail over the dull wood that used to be polished to a gossamer shine. She raises the shades and wishes that someone had covered the furniture.

But which careful relative would have done such a thing? Ellen's mother killed her father with the revolver he kept in his nightstand before shooting herself through the heart. With the swiftness of breaking glass, Ellen and her brother, James, moved south from Hopewell, Connecticut when she was thirteen and he was eleven, to Macon, Georgia to live with their Aunt Leda. The idea was to sweat out the memory of the bloody bedroom, adding their liquid misery to the humid air that seemed to wrap around every Southern pine tree, every water-beaded glass of iced tea. Ellen always wonders, though, *why the heart?*

It was in Georgia that she began to take pictures. She tried to draw the pine-tree canopy first and discovered that she couldn't make it real enough to suit her. Without telling anyone, she took her aunt's camera out of its leather case and lay on her back snapping pictures of the trees above her. The resulting overexposed images were worth no television for a week and Ellen learned from them.

There is an archway leading from the dining room to the living room. After opening the curtains, she sees that the upholstery on the sofas and chairs has yellowed beneath the film of dust. Ellen and James were hardly ever allowed in here for more than a few minutes at a time. The television was upstairs in the room they shared and they played there, outside, or in the attic. Ellen looks at a familiar spot on the oriental carpet by the sofa before going through the foyer and out the front door. She pulls a telephone out of the pocket of her jacket, along with a piece of paper with the phone numbers for the utility companies. A phone call turns the electricity back on.

"It sounds like an interesting old place," said Henry, the real estate friend.

"I haven't been there in almost thirty years. I don't really want to go back."

"Well, I've said a hundred times that you'd make a hell of a lot of money on it if you would just let me put it on the market for you."

"I really don't want to."

"Maybe you should take another look at it. Snap a few pictures, I'll put together a couple of pages on it, put the word out for you. Just for about a month or so. And we'll see what happens?"

"Okay. Fine," said Ellen and she left his office, unsure of why she gave in.

"I think he's right. You should try and get rid of the house. What do you need it for, anyway," said Rachel, her married friend.

They work at a private school in Westchester, just outside of New York City, where Rachel teaches first graders how to share and Ellen teaches nine- through eleven-year-olds how numbers work. They commute together every weekday.

Sitting on the front steps, Ellen still wonders why she gave in as she reads her composition book. Everything on the ruled pages is in the form of random sentences found in between sketches of figures and objects arranged in the rectangular space of the frame. Ellen's notebook is always close at hand, for whatever comes up.

On the front porch, she sits down on the steps and opens her book to a blank page. She normally plans out her pictures weeks beforehand but she has no ideas this time, though it isn't as if she ever forgot the rooms. Her phone rings and she flips it open.

"Who was on the phone," Sofia her mother asked David her father.

"It was no one," he said.

James and Ellen are on the stairs. From where they are—almost at the top—they can see their father at the phone by the breakfast table, a dark figure backlit by the bay window. Their mother is on the floor with a kerchief over her hair, a bucket of soapy water by her side. He towers, their father, and they always wonder why their mother won't stand up.

"How is it?"

Rachel's question is careful, like she's asking about death.

"It's the house. I don't know. It just is. It's dirty, I guess. But the pictures should be interesting. Maybe it'll sell."

The conversation ends quickly and Ellen walks through the kitchen, the dining room, to the back door in the living room. She crosses the deck and steps into the yard. The neighbors whose homes are lacking a dramatic history have kept the grass trimmed but the swingset is gone, and the sandbox. She can see across the yard, over the stone fence, and down the hill to the shoreline rimmed with weathered brown boulders. The waves wash over them and she hears in their breaking the dull rumble of thunder. The clouds are heavy and full of meaning. Ellen walks inside and shuts the doors, both front and back. She tries the lights in the kitchen. They flicker on and she sits at the breakfast table.

"You were out late last night," said Sofia.

"I was working overtime," said David.

"You could have let me know."

"Don't start."

Young Ellen looks at Young James, who fake-stabs his fork into his belly below the edge of the table, where their parents can't see. Ellen rolls her eyes and pretends to drive her knife through her thigh in agreement. Dinner is a similar party most nights, full of vagueness and anger and someone lying. In their room later, Ellen and James make up different ways of doing themselves in while watching "The Partridge Family" and boy is that David Cassidy a dream, almost enough to live for but not quite. James jumps off of his bed in anguish while Ellen hangs herself with a jump rope.

James always liked jumping. He would choose the highest diving board at the community pool and he dove on a team in high school and college in Georgia and Tennessee, respectively. In Connecticut, he jumped from tree to tree in the backyard, from stone to stone on the fence, and only twisted an ankle once. In Macon, he leapt off of Aunt Leda's roof onto the concrete driveway but it was only one story so he just broke his leg and got a concussion. He jumped off of a hotel in Atlanta in 1989 and that was the final dive of his post-undergraduate career. Ellen took pictures, James jumped.

The rain is coming down outside the bay window in the breakfast alcove. Ellen remembers that she promised James in high school after he broke his leg that she wouldn't ever go back to their house in Connecticut except to see it burned down or torn apart. *It's such a beautiful house*, their mother would always say, more to herself than to anyone else. Ellen agreed, but she'd promised James anyway, to keep him from jumping off a higher roof.

Ellen decides to save upstairs for the next day. In the rain, she makes her way to her car and to the only hotel in Hopewell, a Colonial building with creaking stairs, worn carpet, and almost-dry bed linens.

"How late is the restaurant open?" she asks the clerk at the check-in desk.

"It closes at eleven o'clock. The bar stays open 'til two."

She hopes that she will wake up by two a.m. for a morning drink, a small meal, something, because she has a feeling that her house, with its built-in nightmares, might wake her up like it nearly always did for the first two-and-a-half years in Georgia and on and off during high school and college.

The bad dream goes like this: she is trying to get out of the house but all of the doors and windows are locked. The ocean is rising outside and she will drown if she doesn't get out. She runs upstairs, all the way to the attic, where James has found the only



open window. He smiles and leaps out of it. The window slams after him. Ellen looks through to see him floating facedown in the brown water, his body knocking into the bodies of her parents. She beats on the window and wakes up wanting something to drink.

As an adult, she'd hoped that she might have taken enough pictures but there were still the nights when nothing would help her sleep. Not the New York skyline, a cup of tea, an arm around her waist; the arms became fewer and fewer until Ellen gave up. It was a decision she came to when number seven said that he couldn't handle the suffocation of the lifetime that she had locked inside of herself. Of course, he wasn't that specific about it. He was vague, as all men are to Ellen. Except, perhaps, for James.

She was right about waking up but it wasn't until four-thirty in the morning. The tidy sterility of the hotel room lends an unexpected calm as she settles for hot water and a sugar packet from her bag. The slight sweetness of the water vaguely reminds her of the orange juice Sofia would squeeze fresh some mornings, natural and uncorrupted.

The next morning, Ellen enters and turns on the lights in the foyer first thing. The shades are still open so the morning sun casts shadows on everything. She spends four rolls of film on pictures of each room. When she is finished, each window shade is carefully closed again.

A film of dust coats the stairs, muffling her steps as she ascends. The first door is to the guest room. Aunt Leda has stayed there, and others. The second door goes to a bathroom with a clawed-foot porcelain tub. The third room is the one she and James shared until they left, two months after he turned eleven and she turned thirteen. Their birthdays were so close that their father took them out together.

"You wouldn't mind if a friend came along with us," David asked.

"I thought it would be just us, Dad," said James. Ellen said nothing and played with the door handle.

"My friend Irene wouldn't mind joining us. Let's give her a ring."

By 'ring,' he means the doorbell. They have pulled up in front of an apartment complex, gaudily new. David leaves them in the backseat and walks up to the door. He returns with a youthful sixties relic, all go-go boots, psychedelic stripes, and free love. Ellen and James are disgusted by the falseness of her, like a comic-book parody of a human woman: stringy, impossible muscles and hair, tiny dots of color making up a solid. Sweet Sofia for ridiculous Irene, the evil-triumphant-over-good kind of thing that doesn't happen in the comic books.

She photographs each of the first three rooms before opening the door at the end of the hallway. Ellen knows that Sofia and David's bedroom was stripped immediately after they died but she feels like the stains are there anyway. It's just the naked four-poster bed, though, and dressers, wardrobes, a make-up table, and chairs with footrests by the window. She remembers hearing her parents argue through the wall their two rooms shared. David thought Sofia asked too many questions and Sofia thought David was being unfair. David always said that he would teach Sofia about what was really unfair and he taught her by doing what he wanted. Ellen always imagined Sofia sitting on the edge of the bed wondering to herself why she didn't stand up.

It seems to take a long time to find the right angles. Nothing in the room speaks as Ellen is used to hearing: in images, the language of photography. Shadows, light, contrast, depth of field, focus, angle, composition. What is this new thing the room is

trying to say? Two rolls and she doesn't figure it out.

The attic is next and Ellen recalls that this used to be her favorite place in the house. Now it is also the most difficult to get through. The spider webs are the densest here, where Ellen and James used to play when it was raining or when it was too cold to go outside. From antique wooden hope chests, Ellen lifted old lace panels from Victorian gowns out of their tissue paper wrapping and draped them over her arms like wings. James stole magazines from the bottom drawer of their father's bedside table and they flipped the leaves back and forth.

"I hope that never happens to me," said Ellen, pointing to the cheap-looking features of the women stretched across the pages.

"If it does, I'm never speaking to you again," said James.

He curls his lip and snatches the magazine away and stacks it on his lap with the others. She hears him walk down the steps to put them away and then back up the attic stairs. This was the day that James threatened to jump out of one side of the attic, out of the circular window to see how much the ground would hurt.

"Do you think that they'll ever break up," asked James.

"Like a divorce? Maybe... Marianne Blythe's parents did and she says she has to spend weekends with her Dad and his girlfriend."

"I don't think our Dad would care."

"Maybe not."

"Do you think Mom knows about Irene?"

"Probably or she wouldn't always ask who's on the phone."

"Yeah..."

Then James says *What if I jumped? Do you think the ground would hurt?* Ellen says she doesn't know but that it probably would. *Probably?* says James. *What kind of answer is that?*

Ellen spends the least time in the attic because it is darkening outside and the spiders drop out of nowhere, appearing suddenly in the middle of their gauzy webs. She takes a roll of film, moving around careful as a spy to step over boxes and broken boards. A green-tinted mirror spotted with corroded circles reflects the room. She captures the broken reflection and this is the last picture she takes inside.

"This is the last time, David. I'm finished with you."

"I'm sorry, Sofia. I'm so sorry. I'll try my hardest to make everything up to you."

"You always say that, but I'm leaving this time. I have to."

"No you don't."

Sofia leans into him as David's hands crawl up her waist and he kisses her. *I hate you*, says Sofia. She is stiff at first but loosens. They are in the living room while Ellen and James are on the stairs on their way up to the attic. The sounds fly up to them like terrible, sharply angled crows and they hear the slight rip of high-heeled shoes on the Oriental rug.

In the attic, Ellen says nothing and waves an old iron poker through spider webs and kicks up dust on purpose. James the Precocious coughs and says, *What are you so upset about? It's just sex. No big deal.* Dust and web filaments stick to her sweaty young skin. She wipes off the filth with a piece of lace peeking out of a wooden chest. All they can do is wait for them to finish then ignore the obvious gouges made by their mother's

high heels on the carpet by the sofa.

Nine days afterward, a Tuesday, is two months after their birthdays and two gunshots wake them up in the middle of the night. James calls the police from downstairs while Ellen opens the bedroom door like a stupid girl. Her father is on the floor, spread eagle toward the window with a red ink blot on his back. Her mother is on the bed, her entire body curled around the gun in her hands. Blood is on the sheets and on the wall. The room smells acrid and metallic, the way Ellen now thinks of love. This is the first time she asks herself *Why the heart?*

She rushes down the stairs from the attic to the second floor, to the first. On the porch, she makes sure she has all of her equipment before she locks the front door. After a moment, she begins to circle the house and take pictures in the dusky afternoon. Ellen finishes and walks away, her boots sticking a little in the damp earth. In her car, she counts her rolls of film, twelve in all. She calls Henry from the driveway to say she is finished. Rachel says to meet her for dinner but Ellen says no, she needs to rest. The house is looming in the dusk. She gets out of the car like a stupid woman and walks up to the porch, sits down on the front steps.

She realizes sitting there what the bedroom was trying to say. *You cannot have anyone.* James died twelve years ago, his piece of the universe stuck immovable somewhere up in the attic. Rachel had her own family, a husband and children. She had "couple" friends and "parent" friends and shopping trips with her twin daughters and two-hour sit-down meals on Sundays. Rachel was a sentimental friend. Henry understood little beyond how to play the markets: stocks, bonds, real estate, whose shoes to lick and whose toes to step on. He would put together a brochure and sell the house. Henry was a practical friend.

But Ellen exists in a lonely part of the universe, where her grief is gently packed away in tissue paper, like lace in an antique chest. She stands, walks to the door, and leans against it, feeling the cold glass panels and the filmy stick of the cobweb grime. She is caught.

--Dianna Craig '03