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Kim McMullen
Denison University

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The Big House

by Kim McMullen

I peer at the big house through a gap in the azaleas and tick off the possibilities. I think venus fly trap, the house of seven gables, Circus Maximus. I keep it light, picturing packing all those boxes of books and music scores and moving out again, haunting the bulletin board at the Coop for another rental ad.

In a corner of the garden behind a clump of manzanita, the peacock drags its tail limply through the droppings in its tiny cage. A siamese dangles a paw through the mesh overhead, absently terrorizing the bird. She sometimes takes a sparrow up there to eat, snowing feathers down on the neurotic peacock. No one ever bothers with it, but sometimes I hear it squawk at night, rasping like a woman with her throat cut. Then the siamese will cry like an abandoned child. I say to myself: PEACOCK. CAT. Sometimes I even manage to roll over without checking the chain lock.

And today I search for images, the things I understand best. It comes careening down the hill like a runaway circus wagon, wreckless but familiar. Were it anything else—a face glimpsed on the bus perhaps, an old queer with touches of mauve at the eyelids—one might have a right to suspicion. But it is just a house, sprawled in its walled garden the way houses in Marin County do, with its requisite pool, redwood deck and orange trees. And it garage apartment with its requisite student tenant parked next to the BMW.

Even before I moved here I knew these places. Hired by the hour for weddings and soires, I'd sit at the baby grand watching the water rings spread from misplaced glasses. I would eye the silver and the Chinese porcelain, and occasionally catch the eye of someone's husband. The guests would break and wash around me and always, bobbing through it all like a lost beach thong or some other piece of incongruous jetsom, the student—a sleepy-eyed dancer in a green leotard, an anthropology major in dirty pants: hungry-eyed, charming, as exotic as the brass Buddha on the patio. They gestured emphatically, drank earnestly, and disappeared into rented lairs until next summoned.

But I returned home to Berkley and a coed household, still suffering culture shock after six months away from Atlanta. I was banned from cigarettes in my own living room; Barry sold grams of cocaine out of the kitchen to buy books for med school; Elise was worried that ours was a strictly hetero household and didn't I think we should recruit a gay. I was on the verge of raving fascism, ready to throttle the whining Spanish brats next door. Then it came to me one day, spreading itself as gloriously as the spray of Birds-of-Paradise behind which I played Chopin for a reception: I was not occupying my appropriate space in the scheme of things. If a dusty anthro student could to it, what about someone with my promise? Comfort, la dolce vita, the tasteful excesses of the very rich—mine for a song. The minute I saw the ad on the bulletin board I tore it down to make sure no one got there ahead of me. "Garage apartment, pool, garden, music room" it read—such matings are made in paradise.

"Sarah, is that you lurking in the shrubbery?" Erica calls from the deck.

I do not answer her. I am sitting on a legitimate stone bench, I do not lurk. She glides into the yard, stooping to pick snails off the artichoke plants. As far as I can see it is the only attempt at gardening made in weeks. There are oranges rotting exactly where they fell and the pool is clogged with maple seeds. Flashes of pink underpants appear under Erica's Peter Frampton t-shirt each time she bends over. It is all vaguely obscene, and for my benefit no doubt. Every time I see Erica without clothes on I feel like she is taunting me. I tug my black tank suit over one cheek and wish I had gone to rehearse.

Erica was naked when she handed me the key. I memorized the design in the oriental rug, and gazed determinedly over her brown shoulder at the mahogany gleam of a distant piano. I tried to respond appropriately, as mother had raised me.

"The T.V. room is yours to use," soothed the mocha voice. "The hot tub, library, and of course the garden." With a little work--coiffed, brassiered, and suited up--she could have been vice-president of a Junior League. In Atlanta she would be tasteful in her eccentricities, collecting brass andirons or working one day a month in a day care center. But this was California. And that was why I stood before this fifty year old matron, avoiding her fifty year old breasts, pubic hair, and appendectomy scar, trying to concentrate on her pearl earrings.

"Really dear," Erica said, "anything in the big house is yours, except upstairs of course." And if I hadn't been rationalizing, hadn't thought 'her tennis-colored face, the mahogany piano,' I might have seen the wink. Call it paranoia, but I'm sure it was there.

Instead we took tea--Erica with her legs tucked gracefully underneath her, me feeling perspiration slither between my breasts and into my bra. Andrea, Billy, Susan she said--we'd meet, we'd all be friends. She leaned for a cookie and a breast dangled over the sugar bowl. The boy who had had my apartment was off to Nepal; Linda did scrimshaw. And this--Erica patted an enormous Great Dane who loomed from a hallway--was Alice B. Toklas who was an angel if you rubbed her belly. She laughed brightly and jumped from her cushion in the yellow breakfast room. "We're quite an ark here since my husband died."

The sporadic clinking of snail shells dropped into a bucket ceases, and I hear the squeak of damp skin against vinyl. I put down my music theory and pull aside the vines. Erica is naked--unfurled in her full glory on the deck, a pair of plastic sunblocks like egg yolks over her eyes. It is a distinct parody of Rubens; not supple pink pig's flesh, just gold gold gold.

The gate creaks open and one of Billy's friends wanders in with a soccer ball under his arm. I telescope in, enjoying the possibilities--the lump in the adolescent jeans, the tongue run over dry lips. Would it be lust or shock? Any response for Billy's ripe mother.

"Haven't seen him," calls Erica.

"Shit," says the boy, and he stoops to pick snails off the artichokes and flick them into the pool sludge before wandering back out.

I try to return to my theory, but the augmented fifth has lost its wonder. A normal teenager would have crawled through a chink in the fence, masterbated to the scene for weeks.

The one image I refuse to acknowledge is the obvious one: this is one of those Marin County enclaves that caters to rich loons. There are no clinicians, no straight jackets, but these are advanced times. You could easily pay good money to live out your favorite neurosis in the comfort of suburban sprawl. I glance at the upstairs windows and wonder if I am the control subject, my reactions measured in alpha waves or nervous ticks, R. D. Laing set up in the solarium nodding sagely every time I tug at my bathing suit.

But no. I think CIRCUS WAGON. GYPSIES. Things simply change tone out here, washed bright in all this gold.

"They have a special room to fuck in," Megan from the conservatory told me.

"We all do," I said, "it's called a bedroom."

"No this one is different. Weird." Megan herself was wierd. Nearly a dwarf in a Jean-Pierre Rampal t-shirt. Megan did not like me, a natural animosity I'd imagine, part of being a mezzo-soprano and four feet tall. But more, she wanted me to be like the Atlanta in my voice: dogwood blossoms. She did not feel my sophistication warranted. Megan had studied in Paris.

"It's got mirrors and strange carpets. It's got devices," she said.

I nodded. "Devices."

"Devices. The usual I'd imagine." There was a smugness in her voice. She lived on bean curd and gossip.

"Trapezes maybe? Uneven bars and trampolines? Sounds like fun."

"Be absurd," she said. "You'll see. Anybody in the City can tell you." She tugged her t-shirt and Rampal's eyebrows arched over her droopy breasts. "You know how he died..."

"Mid-air fornication with twin contortionists?"

Megan sniffed. "Nitrous oxide," she said proudly. "At a party. He stuck his head in a garbage bag and never came back out. Yale Law, '49. A real pillar of the community." She picked up her portfolio and as I watched her fat ass disappear I thought how Erica would look standing next to her: elegant and smooth, with just the right amount of noblesse oblige. The image routed Megan, sending her home to her veggie roommates. As if someone like Megan could know what goes on behind those tall redwood fences.

I stare curiously at the upstairs windows, finding myself at it more and more these days. There's a great shot from one corner of my bedroom and another from behind the peacock's pen. I can't say exactly what it is I'm looking for--but I'm sure if I ever saw it, I'd recognize it immediately and everything would make sense. There is a wall of windows like a second story greenhouse, and somedays there are billowing curtains like Isadora Duncan scarves, or oriental screens, but never the windows thrown wide open. Occasionally Erica will appear at one and glance out, or Linda or Andrea or someone I've never seen before. Sometimes the stereo is playing Ravel with the speaker pointed out at the garden, then I'll notice it's turned back inward, then out. Then Frank Zappa plays, but soon replaced by chants in a minor mode or a mass. Today there is nothing more than the California sun reflected in plain glass although I watch closely, and I decide to find some place to study which has no view, so that I can get some work done.

As I'm leaving the garden, Erica plucks the egg yolks from her eyes and rolls over.

"Linda's been wondering why you'll never go hot-tubbing with them," she says. "She thinks you don't like her."

"Oh no, it's not that," I reply quickly, not wanting the responsibility for an adolescent identity crisis. "It's that I never have the time. If I'm not practicing, I'm reading. If I'm not reading, I'm practicing. Busy, busy." I sigh to demonstrate my plight. The truth is, I cannot bring myself to even imagine sitting in a hot tub in a naked circle with six other people, rubbing knees. The thought makes me swallow to say; there would be nothing to do if everyone suddenly began to play some sort of est sensitivity game with feet under the water.

Erica smiles her most maternal smile, assigning me to idiocy. She knows, god damn it; I know she knows. And before I cower completely, and confess to even one of my inhibitions, tugging her arm for forgiveness, I retreat to the gate. But she halts me once more to deliver a final challenge.

"We're having a party Saturday. Linda is sweet sixteen. Just some friends for dinner." Her smile is like a password which I obediently repeat.

"Sure," I say. "Sure." Because it all sounds innocent enough. Kids and ice cream, sweet sixteen.

A dark man swoops in on me before I can set my present down, clutches me chummily around the shoulder.

"You must be the musician," he smiles. "Erica promised you'd be here. She's told us everything." He looks like Rasputin in cowboy boots, forty and weirdly magnetic. What's everything, I wonder.

"I'm Derrick and we really must talk." I search the room for help, but the kitchen is populated by unfamiliar faces, tanned and shagged, with abalone jewelry. All looked ridiculously middle-aged, like my parents would in caftans.

"I'm an artist too you know. I'm a writer. I write I have a cabin in the Sierras," Derrick buzzes. When he pulls my arm I nod and smile. "It's really important for artists to communicate, don't you think? Exchange ideas across mediums?" I nod again. Cocktail party swagger. Of course, he could well have written the latest Pulitzer winner. To dodge, I become engrossed in the niagara of platinum hair on the man to my right. He turns, and I realize the color is not platinum but white, and his face reads sixty-five whatever the Mexican shirt proclaims from behind. He creaks over in haraches and touches my chin.

"Erica always manages to find the young and beautiful, doesn't she?" He and Derrick stand back as if examining a sculpture, and I feel like the next virgin sacrifice.

"You were born in September," the old man announces. "It's the amber flecks in your eyes. September." He kisses me beatifically on the forehead and squeaks away.

"October," I shrill. "The same day as Ike." Several people stop to look at me and I turn anxiously to Derrick.

"Isn't Frances compelling?" he asks in an awed voice, sliding his hand down my wrist. The grasp is not seductive, but possessive; the grip of a shopper with a good buy on bath towels. "And you--you're interesting. And I think we should talk, being two artists in the midst of this madness." I look around uncertainly. "Would you like

to talk? Read my work?"

"Sure," I say absently, ready to move on. The music has changed from Debussy to vintage acid rock and I smile. Erica is certainly fond of antiques.

Derrick pulls me along, snaking through the crowd, but we pause before the bar only long enough to snag a bottle of wine and two glasses. I recognize no one. It is as if Erica has rented out the place for the night, played a joke on me. Suddenly Derrick pulls me through a door I had always assumed was a broom closet, and we are in a small study lined with books. "Feed your head," Grace Slick's voice calls faintly through the walls. Down the rabbit hole I think with a panicky giggle.

Derrick pours wine and pulls a manuscript from his jacket pocket. I feel suddenly relieved.

"Oh," I say dumbly. "Oh--I didn't think you meant read it now. I thought you meant SOMETIME. There's a party out there."

Derrick dismisses them with a wave. "Nero fiddled while Rome burned."

"Yes. Of course." I reach for the manuscript.

"No, no," Derrick says. "I must read it. It's so much better when I read it." He pulls out a pair of glasses and props them on his nose.

"Her thighs rose like glistening humpbacks sounding off Point Reyes, and her body held the distinct odor of the sea."

I swallow, fiddling with my shoelace and staring hard at the door as Derrick glances up. He bobs his eyebrows. "It gets better."

"Andre had been a warlock, servicing a coven of thirteen, and after the black heat of their needs, this woman washed around him like cool coastal fog."

Jesus, I think, Jesus. And I feel like I've eaten the wrong half of the mushroom and have grown too tall to leave the room. On the other hand I'm safe: if he's reading, he can't make any moves. But God knows what would happen when the verbal foreplay stopped.

But then that seems absurd. Derrick perches primly on his chair, as innocently as if he were reading **THE CHRONICAL**. And I am left to consider precedents: D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller. The writing itself was pretty good. What if he really was somebody famous and I bolted like a school girl? Because there is a level upon which this is all innocent. Strange but innocent, like nearly everything that happens in this house. It is a ritual of manners I have not yet achieved, as precise as my mother's buffet dinners or Father's Sunday bridge. "A lady is at home in any situation," my mother used to say, and only someone as crass as Megan would bolt.

"Well what do you think?" Derrick asks at last.

"Interesting," I offer lamely. "Detailed. You've a good eye for details. There are a lot of nice adjectives."

He shakes his head impatiently. "No, I want an honest reaction. Did it affect you at all?"

Affect? At all? And as I consider the possible meanings of the question, the possible interpretations he might give any answer, and whether the existence of a Pulitzer Prize might somehow alter either, I hear miraculously through the walls someone call: "Dinner--come please. This way."

I rise obediently. I walk directly toward the door. "We can't be rude and miss dinner," I tell Derrick, and plunge into the cool air of the dining room.

We balance our plates on our knees, the dark sauce of the coq au vin pooling near the salad. The scene has become comfortingly familiar again as we scatter ourselves among the maroon persians and frothing fern stands, and I can see Mother worrying over the chafing dish. Father would turn to the woman in the wing chair. "Nicholas," he would say. "Wasn't he an inspiration on the fourteenth green? It took my breath."

"You know I've had a terrible time finding decent acid," says the woman in the wing chair. "I don't know what it is."

"It's since Owsley retired," says a sad voice at my elbow as Francis' white niagrasa splashes down beside me. "Owsley-- what a mind."

Lights, colors, they say; watching the fog cover Big Sur from someone's yacht. A Dead concert. Nostalgia is as thick as if someone had mentioned Benny Goodman. Why couldn't someone have mentioned Benny Goodman? These were hard times for young hippies--they were people's parents. What right did they have to crawl around on the beach with strange creatures from a Hunter Thompson novel? What would happen if they were about to close a sale, deliver a brief, and suddenly were hit with a flashback that left vague objects fluttering in their peripheral vision? Pillars of the community indeed. I gulp my wine indignantly.

Frances nods his head, passes me a joint. "Tim, Alan and I would hike up Tamalpais in the dark, drop a few hits of White Lightning and wait for the sunrise." He smiles vaguely.

"Tim?" I say. "Alan? Friends of yours?"

Frances beams. "Watts would do mantras of course, to the sun. And Tim was the only one I'd trust my son to on his first trip--twelve years old and flying."

As Frances turns to accept another joint I scan his forehead for lobotomy scars. The room has grown warm and the dim lights have tangled the rug's patterns into dense cobwebs. I feel far too drunk and out of it, but Frances is watching and I must hit the joint anyway.

"Erica always manages to find the young and beautiful," Frances says breathily, grasping my wrist. His teeth are yellow as walrus tusks and his nose is riddled with pores.

"Were they lost?" I giggle nervously.

He fingers my wrist. "My dear, your pulse is racing and your pupils are dilated. You should be more relaxed." He adopts encounter group tones and caresses my hand. "There is too much fear in this world, and there is really nothing to fear. I'm a psychologist and I see people like you every day. Tense, suspicious." My eyes trace a single tosette woven into the rug, but I can't seem to get the pattern straight. "Look at me, dear, look up. You can trust me."

A hand slithers across my shoulder and, for a moment holding both of Frances' already, I am afraid he has grown a third. But it is Derrick back again, and I turn to him in relief.

"Linda's opening her presents," he announces.

"Presents," I repeat stupidly. "The birthday girl."

"I got her a novel," I offer Frances' bared tusks. "EMMA--a comedy of manners." The room is crowded and Frances and Derrick draw closer. I spot Erica at last and she waves, calling gayly "Watch those two!" like any carefree hostess.

Once again the scene rights itself, becomes almost normal. And Frances wanders away, taking the tightness in my shoulder with him. I even begin to enjoy myself. Linda smiles over the gifts and mugs for Instamatics, and I wonder if the party was her mother's idea or if she really has no friends her own age. The only one in evidence is a small girl in a black pants suit with a tuxedo shirt. She seems stylish and assured until one arrives at the mouthful of braces and the oatmeal complexion. It is charming the way she interacts with Linda, playing Abbott to her Costello, handing gifts, acting the straight man. I like Linda even better for this ugly friend.

"Do you feel you're more Dionysian or Apollonian?" Derrick is asking me.

"Scorpio," I say.

"No, no. I mean we all have both possibilities within us, but one dominates." He peers into my eyes. "Apollonian, obviously. I myself am Dionysian to the point of no return. Sometimes it worries me. But it's better than being Apollonian and totally out of touch." He sniffs. "Don't you feel alien to yourself sometimes? To your body I mean. A message might help."

"You're tensing again dear," Frances says, sliding his returning arm around my waist.

"We're discussing her Apollonian dominance."

For awhile I try to argue, point out gray areas, times that I too have been frivolous and abandoned. I argue the beauty of the mind. Then it occurs to me that there is no winning this. It is simply a hustle: my body, your body, let's all go out to the hot tub and grok. Humanity, they whine, emotions. I pull away abruptly and feel like I've stolen the finger cymbals from a Hare Krishna.

"It's Apollo," Frances says, "censoring. Flow with it dear, don't fight it." And his hand works busily down my back.

Vaguely in the marble foyer, I see Linda with a piece of birthday cake for her friend. They stand awkwardly at the door, as if returning from a date, saying goodnight. Suddenly Linda giggles and strikes an ironic pose. "Goodnight, goodnight! Parting is such sweet sorrow. That I should say goodnight till it be morrow." I smile at the line everyone has used sometime to achieve such exits, but the girl does not stop at the single irony. She bows over Linda's raised palm. "Sleep dwell upon thine eyes, peace on thy breast! Would I sleep and peace, so sweet to rest!" Their embrace is quick and the kiss is brief, and I try hard to pass it off as a charming piece of theatrics. But Frances catches me watching and runs his tongue over his lips. "Cute kids."

Suddenly I feel sick, hot and nauseous, unable to take any more. I sway on the snaking carpet, first into Derrick then into Frances, my ears ringing, the lights hazing. This isn't right, any of this. I try to blame the alcohol until it occurs to me that the stew must have been spiked, the wine electrified, that I'm in the middle of my first acid test and failing miserably. My eyes dart from Derrick to Frances. Both of them wait expectantly.

them expectantly. Flow with it, I think, But I really want nothing more than to sink into the arms of some white-coated intern. Halt the experiment.

It is Erica's cool hand on my arm that steadies me finally. "You've held her captive long enough," she says to Derrick and Frances, in smooth hostess tones that

would have done any of my mother's friends proud. "Now you must share her with us all."

My flush dissolves and I smile in relief. Then I panic. Share? With us all? Megan's words come rushing to mind and I see the room upstairs, with crowds of people and devices waiting to dig out the Dionysian impulses cowering in my Southern soul.

"We're showing slides of the wedding," she soothes, "in the garden this spring. It was beautiful with all the trees in blossom." Tiny diamond and jade earrings dangle reassuringly against Erica's Oil of Olay skin.

"Do I know the bride and groom?" I ask as we stroll arm in arm down the hall.

The surprise is not that they are naked, every last one of them, but that I am not surprised. Yet even now the sheer nakedness of the scene takes my breath. The bride is naked, the groom, the minister--priest?--and dowager aunt. They show down from the screen, gathered around the swimming pool and smiling at the naked reflections. No one hides behind the azaleas, no one lurks in the shrubbery parting the vines, and the sun shines shines shines on follicles, moles, goosebumps, wrinkles, pimples, and stretch marks, and everyone smiles smiles smiles.

"Doesn't Harry look well?" one of the guests asks.

"That's not Harry," she is told.

"Oh," she says, lifting her glasses. "I guess not."

"Where are you going?" Erica calls, but I do not even bother to answer.

So I am back in the bushes again, peering in the library windows, locking the back gate, making sure they're all in there where they belong and I'm out here and in control. The peacock squawks when I lean against its cage and I cringe further in to the azaleas. I figure I can wait them out this time, until the last motor starts and the last window is dark. But I'm not budging. The house sits like a broad-shouldered matriarch in the moonlight, and it suddenly occurs to me that if you were to happen upon this garden accidentally, standing uninformed in the blowing vines, and smelling the scorched-sugar bitterness of rotting oranges, you might simply blame a summer of overgrowing, merely too much indulgent sunlight.

Rt. 2 Box 489
Hillsborough, N.C. 27278