In Another Country

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Abstract
That summer we lived in an icebox of a house, where nothing worked. The gas stove was stuck in a chimney that had no fireplace, plaid linoleum covered the chipped and rotting floor, a cold wet wind blew through the cracks in the doors and windows, the light bulbs hummed and fluttered, the clock struck at odd and unwarranted times, and we weren't allowed to drink the water from the sink because it came from an impure place. [excerpt]

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IN ANOTHER COUNTRY

That summer we lived in an icebox of a house, where nothing worked. The gas stove was stuck in a chimney that had no fireplace, plaid linoleum covered the chipped and rotting floor, a cold wet wind blew through the cracks in the doors and windows, the light bulbs hummed and fluttered, the clock struck at odd and unwarranted times, and we weren’t allowed to drink the water from the sink because it came from an impure place.

The television that came with the house was the size of a hand—the screen, that is—and we have small hands—and we sat, night after night, with our faces launched toward the screen and knees wrapped in blankets, waiting until it was late enough for us to go to bed, and hoping for a new day without rain and cold, a dank, damp autumn-like cold which the locals swam and played soccer in, but to which we could not seem to adjust.

We were just the two of us; we tried to get visitors but no one would come. We’d even quick-lipped an invitation into the alumni weekly, but we were destined to be alone, and it came as no surprise that after just two weeks we’d decided against kids, a shared bank account, and marriage—in that order of resolution. So we fought the mildew that seeped from the rental blankets through our sheets to our clothes. We slept in clothes all that summer, so cold and damp was the house, and pressed up against each other without feeling for the sake of keeping warm. Where was the sun, the fireplace, or at least the heater? No one knew, and our landlady—a thick-penned connection we’d made and cultivated through a newspaper post box—had gone south for vacation.

We still had a month left—we were both sticklers for sticking to a plan even if most of it collapsed—when Artemius showed up. He obviously did not read weather reports or watch the television news, because he was wearing shorts and a terry cloth shirt, had swung a life preserver around his neck, and asked immediately when the barbecue would begin. We looked at him as if we didn’t know him, even though he was our oldest mutual friend. Then we expressed joy, relief to see him, and he bowlegged into the house, ignored the cold wind goose-bumping his knobby limbs, and sat down on the damp living room chair and asked for a gin and tonic.

While we mixed him his drink, bumping into each other over the ice and abruptly deciding on who would pour which liquid, Art pronounced on the village near where we were situated, a slanted square with narrow shops and dark bakeries. “Somebody must be dying all the time,” he said. “Everyone’s wearing black.”

Local custom, we assured him. You have to wear mourning for at least one year even if it’s your third cousin.

While we puffed up the clammy furniture and stalled the pendulum of the awful clock, Art made calls with a telephone he had brought with him. “You’d better come,” we heard him say. “They’re in trouble.”

Before long, as if we were all statues until this happened, all our friends began showing up, bearing bottles of liquor and wider, more manufactured smiles than we’d seen on terminal wards of hospitals. Art made hors d’oeuvres and pushed the stove through the window where it bumped down the hill like a suitcase over steps and disappeared into the bay. We laughed, drunk and bewildered by the liquor and friends, and hoped that when we regained sobriety, they’d all be gone, or we would.

But when we awoke, hours later in a fist of sunlight, we found furniture in circles, and all our acquaintances strolling about, popping in and out of showers, running to and from the beach, readying the barbecue. Madeleine pried a jar of honey from the jammed lazy susan. “That’s the way they barbecue in China,” she said. Victor tore and folded paper towels into napkins, and nested them on each of our plates, and Kathryn rinsed fresh fruit with
bottled water she had brought from town. There was champagne and music and the sound of false laughter, and we looked at each other as if set down in some awful foreign place, and tried to go back to bed, but our friends would not let us. They embarrassed us with our college songs and readings from our oldest love letters, and Art stoked the barbecue with Mad’s honeyed chicken parts and fat shrimp and racks of beef, and we sat and ate with them, holding each other’s arm as if it were a piece of wood and we were floating in an empty sea.

Finally, night fell and, presumably by preordained agreement, all our friends, including Art, left us, left us with winking, smiling faces and hands fingered against our hips or slyly patting our stomachs, left us with a house full of bottles and a refrigerator overflowing with barbecue, left us forgetting or ignoring that we had already, irrevocably, agreed—consented—to leave each other.

After that, the heat rose over the last backward mountain and insects invaded our house—large winged ants, the likes of which we’d never seen before, and their small timid earthbound relatives, who ran in circles at every foot stamp. We watched them all amazed, as they sprawled our walls and paraded our kitchen, until we learned that the big ones bit. Then we worked the house with a spray can and powdered the cracks with a fortifier. Spiders began nesting in every structured joint, and we let them be as our last line of defense.

Soon we discovered we were in another country, and although we did not talk of marriage, money or children, we felt mutually content. We burped into each other’s ears as expressions of intimacy, passion, security. Our washed clothes hanging on the line dried in record time. We put away the television set for star gazing, and concocted dinners from neighborly vegetation, leaves of lettuce that ran the length of our arms and cherries purple and soft. The heat continued to sedate us, and we slept entwined til nearly noon, made feeble attempts at wading in a downhill stream—but it was too cold, much too cold, and sharp stones gnawed at our feet—and worked on crossword puzzles from old newspapers we had brought with us.

We began to receive mail, computerized queries from the utility companies wondering where we’d got to, handwritten notes from our employers wishing us the best of summers, and dizzying accounts of adventures abroad from our wealthier siblings. As we ate our black-clothed village’s crackers and cheese and pondered our unwanted futures yoked to large glass buildings—I don’t want to do what we’re doing; Well neither do I—a cold hand fell on the valley and doused our house with a rain that began to hail, and a darkness that made us forego our puzzles.

We awoke to a goldenness over everything, over the fields which were crusty and ochre, over the stream and the bay with its jutting, orangey barnacled rocks and its dying schools of rainbow fish, and over the trees, fullblown and thick with bristling nests.

We tried to discern which day it was, but we had no idea, no way. The television was on the fritz, our mail arrived without postmark, we had no phone and no radio, and the villagers down in the town looked at us as if we spoke a foreign language. We began to call each other by the days of the week that we imagined—Mr. Tuesday and Madame Wednesday and so on—and our crucial questions of where and who we were got stuck in when was now. We slept both days and nights—whenever we felt like it—and our car wouldn’t start and our legs felt numbed. In the midst of this motionless confusion, an iciness came over the house that we could not explain, and we shut windows and shutters (in this house the shutters followed the windows into the outside world), moved all the lamps into one box-like room, piled blankets from the floor up, and waited for our landlady, that mysterious woman with the magic marker handwriting, to rescue us.

She never came. Instead we felt a hoary whiteness knocking against our windowpanes, and when we tried to peel back the shutters, they were coldly stuck. We ate from supplies of powdered soup packets, reaching out through the door for chunks of ice that we could melt by our own respiration, and together we grew gaunt and narrow, like the trees we could see leaning into our parlor skylight. How unusual we thought ourselves, this house, the weather. Our careers seemed but dim consequences of our upbringing and education, something which we could not have avoided even if we had wanted to, and our bodies, all angular and lumpy, reflected a maturity which we previously had been unable to reach.

We were comforted by the house with its perpetually webbed door frames and furniture joints, by the amount of life it could birth and sustain. We slept, it felt, nearly all the time and not just in long bursts of depression. We were elated with sleep, in it we were more one than ever, and we had found the perfect position—which had always otherwise eluded us—for holding each other. We did not read or write, did not fondle or cavort, but merely lay, like facing spoons somehow pressed fully together, and in our silent touch we felt warmth and even knowledge.

Long legs of sun rushed through cracks and holes, and in the new greenness of the room we were pulled from sleep first by the touch of heat and then of hands and wet sponges and voices that we immediately recognized.

“Where have you been?” said Art and Mad and all our friends. “And what are you going to do with your lives now?”

And beneath our closed eyelids we answered what we had just learned, that in this sleep there is forgiveness and reconciliation and everything under the sun, and as to the rest of it, well, we did not know. We never did.