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# Playing House

Taylor Andrews

“Who we are has to do with where we are from. We have a tendency to identify ourselves according to the places in which we dwell.” – Janet Donohoe, “The Place of Home”

## *First*

I’m remembering the house wrong—my father is clear on that. We had a sofa in the back room I keep forgetting about. I can’t see it at all when I close my eyes, and although I’m told it was brown, part of me is certain that, if it had ever existed, it had been beige, nearly yellow. There was also a wicker bucket chair that spun in sickening circles; I fell out of it countless times, its crinkly whisper crunching in my ear as it toppled down on me. This chair I remember vividly—peeling at the caramel-colored weaving, loosening the crisp wicker seams, swishing around in jerky curves as I watched TV. This chair would vanish after we moved. I would continue to expect it to appear in the new house, as tall and unsteady as I had been at that age, sitting solitary in the middle of the room.

I was twelve, just about to turn thirteen, when we moved. I got a camera for my birthday, and the first pictures I took were of that house, the last day I was inside it, certain that someday I would need to remember what it looked like. I can’t recall the color of the carpet in the bedroom I lived in for twelve years. I can only barely see the kitchen: a dirty stove and brown cabinets with whiny hinges, that long oval radio in the corner next to my inhaler. The bathroom is little more than one white tile that I could peel up from the floor, that I would have hid a key under if I were a (very ineffective) secret agent. It scares me how little comes back to me, how little can be restored in full. The pictures from my first real camera sit somewhere in the digital world, forgotten, the only proof of my childhood home, each one showing an empty room, each one a little blurred, a little crooked, taken by a child who was afraid to let go.

## *Nucleus*

The idea of home in and of itself is an expression of intimacy, of familiarity. It is where we shed our outside expressions, our joviality or melodrama or charm, our social survival mechanisms in a sense, and can just be. The home is the place in which a person can create their own world,

a tiny ecosystem of things and feelings, accessories to life, all chosen and arranged in a way that is unique to the individual. Perhaps the most singular aspect of this home is the bed. The bed may be the most specific and personal object in our lives. It is a place that requires nothing from us. It is a place characterized by bodies in their most vulnerable and unpretentious state. The bed accepts no façade. It is a microcosm in the individuality of our home spaces; it is a fundamental detail of our personal ecosystems. It is the cell in the body of a home.

The ecosystem of my best friend is clean and blue. It is feminine, warm, bright; it is floral prints, novels, cooking tools, sea glass. Her bed is strict and smart, the sheets perfectly straight, even when she is under them. She smooths them around her body, tucking in her legs as she sits reading silently.

The ecosystem of my younger brother is characterized by clothes, trophies, lacrosse sticks, video games. His bed is stark in comparison. Two queen mattresses piled on the floor, a twin sheet half stretched over top, the pillow closer to the middle of the bed, the blankets swirled around abstractly, like a brush stroke.

My ecosystem is casual disarray, occasionally crescendoing to ecstatic chaos, and my bed is much the same. Flannel sheets, plump pillows, a desperation to be comfortable, while also nesting among piles of books, clean clothes, speakers. My bed will carry the entirety of my waking anxieties into my dreamspace.

While living with my grandparents for awhile in middle school, I began to develop tics, the way some girls were getting breasts and growing out their bangs. I fell in love with washing my hands. Perhaps it was because my grandfather was obsessed with cleaning, or perhaps it was because the house was so thick with tension I felt the need to control something. It was a reset button. It was safety. If nothing else, my anxiety about germs could be neutralized, and that moment of relief was enough.

It didn't become apparent, this love affair, for years. It didn't get beyond me or rule my life, so I've never considered it more than an inconvenient coping mechanism, but after a while I began to note how raw red my hands were. They cracked and bled through the winter, when the biting cold already weakened them, and they stayed a sensitive pink into the warmer months. My anxieties peaked once I came to college, and I became more and more concerned with germs as everything was unfamiliar and uncontrollable.

I fixed my every hope for safety onto my bed. I decided it would be the one place that was clean, the place I could keep the germs from me. The thing I could control. I changed from the clothes I wore out, even just to

class, if I was going to get under the blankets. If anything “dirty” touched it, or, god forbid, a blanket dragged on the floor, I would be sent into a frenzy. I recall specifically a sharp moment of panic when I realized I’d left my shower caddy momentarily on my comforter—once I realized it had touched the bathroom floor and then my clean place, I started to cry. I felt helpless. I balled the heavy blue blanket up into my arms and then into a washing machine almost immediately. I took a breath. I got back into control.

As my life got more and more chaotic, it became impossible to wash my hands the way I wanted—over and over, whenever I touched something that felt unclean. Years passed and slowly I cut down, and the back of my hands faded from their inflamed flush. I still scratch my face or adjust my hair with my palms facing out, relying on my knuckles, a relic of the years when my embarrassment of their bloody cracks kept them tucked always into sleeves. I still avoid sitting on my bed in my jeans when I can, though it’s become increasingly difficult to keep up with my own demands. However, part of me still attempts to keep it germ-free. To keep it my safe place. It is the one way I know how to make myself deeply and truly at home.

### *In Motion*

“ ‘One never reaches home,’ she said. ‘But where paths that have an affinity for each other intersect, the whole world looks like home, for a time.’ ”

—Hermann Hesse

We were weekend wanderers, my family and I. We spent years drifting between open house signs; we were a flock of misfit birds, looking for a warm place to wait out the Buffalo cold. My father: loving and round and made up only of extreme emotions, good and bad. My mother: small, blonde, and sweet, often silly, often sensitive. My brother: then so young, with a full face and a shiny head of flat yellow hair and already more charming than anyone else I have ever known. The four of us ambled, looking always for a house that we could make a life in, one that wasn’t the brick-and-blue box with the spinny wicker chair in the midst of the choking and dirty suburb. I was nine, I was ten, I was twelve. I knew the words contingency and mortgage without understanding that they kept us from moving into the house on the top of the high hill with the big living room window, or the perfectly square house in the middle of the woods with the sprawling yard.

The idea of home, the feeling of it, endured through those years in our tiny house, and we brought it into our car. Weekend after weekend, Fall

Out Boy CDs played on repeat as we bounced around the county, searching for somewhere to settle. The space was crammed with relics of us, the nomads. Novels I consumed voraciously and Dramamine so I could keep them down. Hand-held video games for my brother, the high whine of the background music barely audible. Glossy magazines for my mother, her shoes off, mouth pursed. And always, always printouts, brochures, posters of beautiful houses we would never live in.

I yearn for it sometimes. I wish I could force the four of us into a car for that long again, in the hopes that we'd talk, focus, spend time present with one another for a few hours. I am nostalgic for it all, from the leg cramps to the stories of my parents as high schoolers, young and stupid and very in love. I do not regret us as a roostless flock. I believe we could have made any of those houses a home.

### *Shoebox*

It was the first night I was really here, and it was bitterly cold outside. I had been in the empty, spacious house on the eerily deserted college campus for five days alone, but that night a dozen people flooded in, and I was Here. The tables were crowded to bursting, the people were loud, crushed side by side and spooning spaghetti into their mouths. The night was sharply frigid, the snow preparing to descend, and the winter smell of clean blue air was striking against the windows. Inside though, it was all golden-yellow warmth.

We were lined up and down the kitchen with every chair we could find, pulled from bedrooms and study rooms, all of us elbow-to-elbow. Two of the boys had boiled my spaghetti in a huge pot, the spaghetti I was saving for the week. But I couldn't mind, not when the trade-off meant all of us together. Here was a fresh salad, a round cherry tomato rolling down the floor. Everyone's faces sparkled with laughter. A fridge of glass beer bottles, our hands all clutching at one another to solve the riddles underneath the caps. A perfect, surreal glow surrounds this moment in time. It was pure and achingly beautiful in its newness—we hadn't had time to ruin each other yet. It was like a deeply saturated Norma Rockwell painting, an American classic, a collection of grown-up children around a table playing house.

### *Treading Water*

"The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned." – Maya Angelou

The semester wore on, slow and absolute. The vicious-cold winter

had given way to that fragrant brown dampness of spring; the sweet smell of decay and the sharp yellow-white brightness of the sky were unwelcome. I hate spring. I have always found it fickle and ugly.

A friend, Andrew, and I were spending a night on the blue college couches—those faux-leather monsters that complain every time you move. I had left the paper to the last possible moment, and I was expecting a rude and exhausting evening ahead. In time, Andrew finished his work and retired to his room, smiling with soft concern.

An hour passed, maybe. It was 2 a.m. or later. I woke up angry, angry at myself for sleeping on that horrible, loud couch, angry for losing focus, angry for struggling through the spring like I had never been taught to swim, like I would always be half-drowning. Andrew was standing at the end of the couch like he'd been caught, grinning, pillow in hand.

"I thought maybe you'd want this."

And the vicious blue couch became my bed.

### *Abroad*

My host mother's hair was in loose curls, and her voice sounded like brown leather. The tiny Italian apartment was little more than a few rooms jutting off a narrow hallway, filled with books, paintings, photographs, and a number of things quaint and charming. The laundry machine was in the small bathroom, and because there was no dryer, my socks and underwear were draped over the windowsill. It was a colorful space, a warm space, and it smelled strongly of rich, heavy food.

"One thing bothers me," I stuttered in broken Italian as Donatella and I sat at her small table for dinner. "There's no word for..." Here I struggled, switched into English. "Home. There's house, but not home."

"*Casa*," she said, her brow furrowed, not understanding. "*Casa* is both. *Tutte due*. House and home. Same thing"

"But they're so different. In English, a home is so different, so much more. How can there be no word for that?" I was beginning to sound judgmental, and both of us were frustrated that neither seemed to understand. This taxing barrier, this inability to communicate, would come to characterize my stay in Italy. I could never make the country home; I could never make Donatella's small, light-filled apartment home, because I felt so muted, suffocated by the language.

"*Casa*," she said definitively, "is home too."

I was uncomfortable with this idea, with this lack of distinction, until it occurs to me months later that perhaps to Italians, the notion of a "house" is the unnecessary one. Perhaps there is no need to distinguish. Perhaps they know better. Perhaps to them, every house is a home.

## *Lighthouse*

It was pushing 11p.m., and I was bone-tired. Has there been a more appropriate phrase? The exhaustion permeates. When I walked in the door, a small group of my housemates were gathered in the living room waiting for me, a movie queued, hot cocoa brewed up and pressed between their palms. I was restless with joy. I could not sit among them and watch the foreign film because I was simply too happy, too relieved to see them sitting there harmonious and content. I made oatmeal cookies with instant oatmeal packets and someone's open bag of chocolate chips. I felt soft and whole.

The evening ended with us piled together like children, like puppies, on the couches. We were knotted limb to limb, laughing, playing MASH, telling stories. I have felt lost for longer than I could know, but I will always consider them my lighthouse.

Throughout the evening, I took pictures, near-obsessively. I have more than a thousand from the last few months. Of Halloween, of our picnics, of silly moments I am scared of losing. Of them together on the couch that night, one laughing mass. I can't stop taking pictures of them. I cannot help wanting to capture their light for myself.

I no longer take pictures of empty rooms.