

Kelsey Adams

Ghosts in the Walls

At the end of Asbury Road, the oldest road in my world, sits a house. Nestled in with golden rows of corn, kissed by vines on three sides and cinched tight up front by cracked asphalt, the house waits, resting now but humming still with the stories of the lives that have been lived in it. The creaky floor is mostly quiet, though decades of footsteps live in the linoleum, phantom paths treading themselves and retracing their way back. The shelves and drawers and closets have been excavated in archaeological digs through memory and time, and each room seems deflated in some way. It's barren—but not cruelly so. It's comfortable and sad, still like home. There's a hazy human presence lingering there, benevolent ghosts floating just beyond the periphery of the room, like they just walked out to the garden and will be coming right back. The things that *were* seem to lie just beneath what now *is*—and if I close my eyes long enough, I'm there, barefoot in the soft front yard, knobby knees and stubbornness and the same sad curiosity I've always felt about the world. I can close my eyes and see it as it was, a living, breathing place, the place where we were planted, where we took root and bloomed.

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In my mind the house is big. I perceive it always with elementary eyes, the colors of the sky outside and the sunshine slanting off the barn's red roof saturated, a little blurry and out of focus. The summers were eternal for my sister and me. We played beneath our guardians the oak trees and came inside, holy precious terrors, Oreos mouths and wasp stings and chicken noodle soup. We begged Granny to teach us the magic of flour-dusted hands, and then we napped on the floor, afternoon refrigerator Crayola Picassos. There were stacks of catalogs and magazines, library books and crossword puzzles. Entire worlds spun parallel to one another in bookcases, and Polaroids faded slowly in wooden

boxes—curled hair, red lipstick, black car, portable radio. We dug through those old treasures like explorers in exotic lands, looking for secrets and stories in the cedar chest, trying to find where we came from.

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When Granny died, it seemed like the house grew three times its original size. Papa seemed smaller, unsure at first how to navigate the open space. We came to know him more, though, slowly, comfortable in our worn chairs and football games. We learned how beautiful things can come after devastation, the way you can burn a field to the ground one year to allow for new growth the next. There's something gracious about a splintered family trying to reset the broken bones, something honorable in the attempt, even if they heal improperly and leave a scar.

I remember waking up one morning and longing to be close to the earth, feeling flooded and awestruck by the power of that place. I found new little things to love every time I returned—brown work gloves in jacket pockets, mud on the boots tucked in the back hallway closet. I started craving black coffee and looking closely at his calloused hands. Those hands wrote the stories in the land, the land in the stories in blood and under fingernails, hands on tools in the shed, hands on steering wheels and on the heart. Family histories were laid on the table before us, the old tales mythologized and made colossal, divine and immortal in their antiquity. For the first time, we drank whiskey, too, and we talked about the things that mattered; we knew that the land was inside of us, and we were borne of it, the mud caked on the boots, and we felt proud.

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The house went quiet then, much too fast, and Papa's solid footprints in the garden washed away. Now the cement handprints on the carport are dusty and overgrown, and the sun beats down in his old cruelty, fiercer and harsher with the oak trees gone. When I go there, I close my eyes and think about all the time we always thought there'd be, the things we didn't do because the days seemed

innumerable before us. I think of the trinkets in vanity drawers and the boxes of cassettes, all the tiny stories that lived within the big story.

The house is haunted, but the ghosts are kind. If you walk into a room fast enough, you might catch one reading a novel in the recliner, the other walking in the tomatoes with a Coors can in hand and another in the shirt pocket. The stories are alive still, stories like ghosts—stories tucked into cookbooks beside the recipe for the green bean casserole and folded into worn leather wallets, stories of the drunken dances on wedding night tables and card games in the early morning hours. These stories live in the soil, giving life to the next generation of crops and people, weaving us all together like weeds tangled on the side of the road, beautiful in our plainness and honesty.

The house is teeming with stories, the ghosts seated around the dining room table and mowing the lawn—cerebral flashbacks of fist fights in the front yard on Thanksgiving, imprints of wine-soaked giggles and cigarette smoke tendrils on the carport on a humid Tennessee July night. They replay over and over, silent movies projected on the wood-paneled walls, whispers coming from the next room. The ghosts walk through the cornfields, the stalks moving in the wind as though grazed by spectral shoulders, the soft dirt the place of rebirth.

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At the end of Asbury Road, the oldest road in my world, sits a house. It lives in the marrow of my bony fingers, in the pulse of my muddy ancestral line. It's the place my memory intersects with mystery, the magic of the ordinary moments we string one after the other like lights on a strand to make a life. And I know I will be a ghost there, too, one day, one of the hazy memories living in the walls, and the house will keep my bones.