

Shiva

Houses are shells for us to fill.

Those are the words you once said to me, sat on your patio, our hands clasping mugs of tea as we surveyed our day's efforts. The garden seemed caught in the hiatus between afternoon and the half-light preceding dusk, the lowering sun turning the grass golden so it no longer looked dry and coarse, but soft—the way it felt as it disintegrated beneath my bare feet.

I don't remember what provoked those words; so often would you spout such phrases without discernible prompts. Regardless of your meaning, you uttered them to the garden, letting them roll over the lawn and climb over the fence beyond, to join the sun slowly retreating behind it.

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Cross-legged among the boxes, I flick through the albums plucked from one of the containers beside me. In some photos you're there, beaming, though I remember how that smile was switched on for the camera. The settings vary, sometimes the beach, your garden, this house—furniture standing in spaces now occupied by cardboard towers.

I push the album to one side and stand, arms extended outward to balance myself as I rise, like a child completing a gymnastics sequence—proud before an imaginary audience. My soles stick on the parquet floor as I walk through the house, empty shelves and picture hooks watching my movements like sentries or an honour guard, formally observing this ceremony of mine.

My room—which once felt little more than a box—seems bigger in its emptiness, my possessions stacked away in the garage to be moved in the morning. I press a hand to the wall, remembering when this room was blue, not cream, and yellow even before that. I shut my eyes and think of the nights spent awake, staring at the ceiling, and those when Dad would fall asleep on my floor, hoping his presence would persuade my reluctant mind to do the same.

I exit, watching phantom children learn how to scale the stair gate together, dashing between the two upstairs rooms in a game only they understood, the rules of which are now lost to me.

Perhaps I thought I'd find such things once everything else was packed away. But maybe that thought was nothing more than a life-jacket I've been clinging to; something to make this betrayal seem more survivable.

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The last time you spoke to my mother, you said she was leaving you there to rot. I wasn't there, but in my head your voice was filled with blind rage, inconsolable and indiscriminate in its anger.

I don't remember the last words we shared. How can something be remembered as a goodbye, if it is not known that such a moment will be its last? I stopped visiting because the person I saw was no longer you. The Alzheimer's had chewed you out until it realised it couldn't swallow, then spat back the mess—the way you started spitting back your carrots.

Your thin fingers would clasp my wrist, interrupting me as I read fourteen-down. Your nails would break my skin, leaving little red crescents over my veins. But I don't

think harm was your intent—you wanted to know we were there, real, not your mind playing tricks in the way it told you it was weeks since you saw us last, rather than two days. You wanted to feel reality and be assured it couldn't be a lie.

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Sometimes, you come to me in the night. Your gaunt face screams through the darkness, demanding vengeance, retribution—but on whom I don't know. The whites of your eyes seem so wide, so penetrating I start to believe you can read my mind and know why I never came back. The words you mouth are vitriolic, and I'm too terrified by the pain in your cries to remind you of your death. It is only when I turn on the light—allowing its soft yellow glow to illuminate the room—that you recoil, your face now only a shadow cast upon the wall.

But even when I close my eyes, light left on, your face is burnt into the back of my lids, staring at me through my own sockets.

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We carve our marks in the sand as we run, cold air ripping at our ears until I can't tell if all I'm hearing is wind or sea. Hand outstretched, I can feel Charlie's head ducking and rising beside me as I sprint and he gallops, matching my pace.

When I halt, face numb and gasping at the air, he waits—mouth open in a blissfully ignorant grin, tongue flapping as drool flies from his mouth, ripped from his gums by the gusts.

The midwinter beach is an empty place—hostile to those who haven't grown up by it, seen it in all its temperaments, even when the water froze upon the sand, carving glassy sheets of ice into piles along the shoreline. Only here is the noise finally loud enough to drown out your voice.

Retracing our tracks, I spot shells wedged sporadically in the sand, loosening and gathering each one in my fist. Their textures imprint on my hand as I grip them, leaving patterned ridges in my palms. As I approach the lifeboat ramp to return to the car, I divert, Charlie's wet body slowly wandering behind me as I meet the ripples. One by one, I toss the collected shells out into the sea, watching them tumble through the sallow sky. As they drop, some misguided by the wind, the grey sea beneath parts to permit them entry, and I imagine their exteriors shattering into pieces upon impact with the water.

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Your favourite days were when we took you away from that place, usually to the garden centre up the road. We would haul you into the car, along with the wheelchair you'd been using since the hospital; a swift end to all our efforts to keep you walking.

On arrival you would demand food, your stomach burning with hunger—convinced that if you didn't eat, you'd die. We would order something simple—a turkey sandwich perhaps. But once it was set before you, your appetite would shrink to no more than three, perhaps four small mouthfuls. After those bites were taken, you would offer up the rest to me, the limp grey meat hanging in your trembling hands as you tried to add it to my carvery. I would look to my mother and uncle—each of us your blood yet none of us able to fix you—not knowing how to respond. Even at my attempts to

explain, you would still present the remains, confusion on your face because you didn't understand that, shredded and mauled, this food could no longer be eaten. You, who used to cook and bake with us as children—who used to teach domestic science.

When the conversation moved too quickly, you would smack your palm against the table until we were silent, our eyes on you—everyone else's eyes on us. A smug smile would paint your lips, and the three of us would sit, quietly, before returning to our conversation.

The final stages of those trips were the laps round the shop. From your wheelchair, you would grab at objects passing by, throwing your arms out at anything sugary, colourful or soft.

More than once, my uncle would stop pushing your chair and shout, warning you of the injuries you could obtain from acting like this—of those frail arms you could break with ease. Unable to process the noise, you would merely cry in response—wailing at these injustices—and he would continue to push you like an aged toddler; Benjamin Button meets the real world.

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We waited until you were dead before we emptied your house.

With your possessions sprawled across the floor, some gravitating into piles, it felt like the house of a stranger whose life I had watched parts of on a screen. With all the mess it seemed nothing more than one of the craft days we spent there, painting and constructing anything out of everything. We waited out of respect, but perhaps also out of some impossible hope that you would recover, return to that house so life could go on, unperturbed by what this year had done to all of us.

As they packed, they discussed the will—which items must be set aside in case of redistribution. All I could think about were the books we used to read in your bed in the mornings, curled under piles of duvet and denying the sun fighting its way through the net curtains.

But I couldn't find them.

I searched the spare bedroom, the faded yellow toybox and the bookshelf hidden behind the door—they weren't there. No doubt you turned them out years ago without thinking to mention it. It wouldn't be the first time.

It took months, but we found our way to the bottom of your hoarded possessions. Your art supplies were donated to the school, though I'm surprised even they had space to store it all. In various pockets we found money, folded away only for you to forget and repeat. Perhaps—if reincarnation is true—you will return as a squirrel. Better that than hell.

A stranger lives there now.

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I find myself in the living room once more, staring at the space where I sat several hours earlier. The darkness outside solidifies my reflection in the window at the end of the room, the garden now swallowed by the night. I seal the lid of the last box, letting the parcel tape squeal as I drag it across the flaps.

I won't abandon these memories, but I must—I need—to let this resentment go; the idea that moving on is treachery.

I won't let the paranoia and spitefulness devour me the way it did you.

The child who played that piano, slamming her books down in frustration is carried with me, as is the one who splayed Lego across this floor, daring trespassing feet to falter.

Yes, it is good to move on.

I pull the front door shut behind me, my breath forming a white cloud in the dark. The grass, cemented by a thick frost, crunches under my boots as I walk, diagonally as always, across the front lawn towards the driveway's mouth. I turn for a last look at the house, lurking on the edge of the blackness, and walk out up the road. The small gravel stones have frozen in the cold, forming ridges—miniature mountain ranges like glue mixed with sand. I breathe out all the air I've been holding, the way a child imitates a dragon, letting it escape into the sky above.

It's as you said: houses are shells for us to fill.