

Property Values

By Alexander Saxton

It had been empty for as long as anyone could remember, and even in my brightest early memories of the neighbourhood I grew up in, the house at the end of the lane stands apart with its darkened windows.

I think, and remember, this is all third and fourth-hand information, that there had been a house there before, one of those beautiful old pseudo-tudor houses that they liked to build in this neighbourhood before World War One, but that some one-percenter had torn it down to build a mcmansion back in the late '80s. From what my parents said about it, the house itself had mostly gone up in about three months, but then some sort of a crisis developed, and the money for or interest in the house dried up, and the construction stopped.

And once it had stopped, it stayed stopped.

The homeowners in the neighbourhood were always upset about it, but the family had too much money for anyone to push them around, and so the house stayed like that for six months, and then a year, and then for ten and fifteen years, until it just became so much a part of ordinary life, that nobody noticed the big, vacant house with its overgrown lot and cracked stucco anymore. It became something that your eyes just slid over, and it would take a visitor from out of town to remind you that you could hear the snap and flutter of tarpaulin every time you walked past, or that the grass had grown knee-high on the cold side of the sidewalk.

"Some millionaire's abandoned house," you'd tell them, when that happened. And then they'd nod, and shoot the building a wide glance out of the corner of their eyes, and continue down the sidewalk taking pains to put you between them and it, always with their arms folded in front of their bodies.

But after a few days, they'd have become just as good at not noticing it as you were.

There were only two times in my life when that house stood out to me.

The first was when I was a kid. I don't know how old I was. Young, for sure. Too young to be wandering off on my own, because my parents still talk about how terrified they were when they turned around and found that I wasn't in the front yard anymore. So I must have been really young.

My memories of it are little kid memories, too. All primary, cartoon colours. Bright blue sky, fat yellow sun, thick green grass. I had a red plastic toy truck- it was my favourite, and it has to have been the reddest thing that ever existed.

I guess when you're that young, your social instincts aren't quite what they grow into being, and so when everybody looks away from something, you don't automatically know that you're supposed to do the same thing. And so, even though there was an unwritten rule about the house in the neighbourhood, I wandered diagonally across the street towards it. Maybe I was drawn because it was painted white, and caught the sunlight better than any of the other houses on the street. I don't know.

What I remember is, climbing over a collapsed section of the cinderblock wall that fenced in the lawn, and walking towards the front door. The grass was at my shoulders, and the weeds in that yard were taller than my head, and it was hard for me to make my way through. That red plastic truck was my favourite thing in the whole wide world, but it was slowing me down, so I dropped it and left it behind me in the grass. The house towered over me, its cracked white walls gleaming in the sun. A pair of columns stood on either side of the door, and in my memory, it seems like an abandoned temple, awesome in size and mystery. The windows were very dark.

I just stood in front of the front door, I don't know for how long, staring up at that building. I would have been close enough to hear my parents frantically shouting for me, but all I can remember hearing is the wind playing through the grass around me.

My mom was crying by the time she found me. Even with a child missing, something about the abandoned house all but slipped from their minds.

Here's something about this incident that I don't remember. My Dad says that, when he picked me up and carried me back to our house, I was facing back over his shoulder, and I started to cry.

And when he asked me what was wrong, I asked him,

'Why isn't the girl who lives there allowed to come out and play?'

And when he told me that nobody lived in that building, I wouldn't believe him.

After that, I wasn't allowed to go near the house on the corner. It makes a lot of sense. You don't want your kid playing around near a building that's probably rotted and halfway to collapse. And you think it would be the kind of rule that somebody would chafe against, except that, again, the house was so mundane, such a part of normal life, that it was easy to forget about, even if it was a taboo.

And so I didn't have anything to do with the house at the end of the street until I was well into my teens.

Some biographical detail: my parents had quit smoking when I was young, and like how religious converts become more orthodox than those raised in the faith, they took to being non-smokers like zealots.

But you know the usual story: you turn sixteen, you like the wrong person, you start hanging out with their group of friends, and just like in an after-school special, you start smoking to try and fit in.

Which is how I found myself at the end of the block that night, looking for a place to smoke where I wouldn't get caught and lectured.

A cloud drifted from the face of the moon, the house at the end of the lane caught and caught the blue moonlight and lit up like silver. For the first time since I was a child, I climbed through the gap in the wall.

The grass on the other side was even taller than it had been, but now it only came to my thigh. The house also seemed smaller, but it still had an inspiring and mysterious air. The windows were still dark.

I tripped over something- An old toy truck, bleached by years in the sun, leached of its colour by the moonlight. I left it where it was, and sat between the pillars on the front stoop to light up a cigarette.

It was a warm night, but it was cold between the pillars. It had been a sunny day, but the stoop hadn't sucked up any of the heat. My hands were fumbly. It took me three tries to light my cigarette.

The door creaked open behind me.

I was on my feet and halfway down the path before I could even exhale. Nothing grabbed me from behind though, so I turned to look back at the house. The door hung half-open, as dark as the windows. A girl was leaning against one of the pillars, wearing a floral dress.

GIRL: Boo

READER: (catching breath) *Not* funny.

GIRL: (laughs) That's because you didn't see yourself jump.

E: Who are you?

She gestured with her head.

G: I live nearby.

R: I've never seen you before.

G: No? Well I've been around.

R: What were you doing in there anyway?

She shrugged.

G: It's a cool place. You obviously like hanging around abandoned buildings, too, so what's the big deal?"

She stepped down onto the pathway. I'd dropped my cigarette when she opened the door, and it was smouldering in the moonlight. She stepped on it and ground it out with the ball of her foot.

G: Can I have one of those?

R: Sure.

She took the cigarette from my hands and let me light it for her.

G: (coughs)

R: (laughs) Not a smoker?"

G: (catching her breath) Are you?

R: No, not really, no.

She managed not to cough on the second drag, and jerked her head in the direction of the house.

G: Want to take a look around inside?

I looked back up at the building. Now that I'd seen her come out of it, it didn't creep me out as much. Well, maybe not quite as much.

R: Is that a good idea?

G: Why not?

R: The owners might have an alarm.

G: They don't.

R: Then there might be a chainsaw wielding homeless maniac living there.

G: (laughs) If he's homeless, then how can he afford a chainsaw? Come on, you baby, don't let me face the maniac alone.

She turned back up the path, and, not knowing what else to do, I followed her.

It was a damp kind of cold inside the house, and you could almost hear the earthworms tunnelling up through the baseboards. It wasn't as dark as I'd expected, though. The tarps covering the windows were lit up by the streetlamps outside, and the moon shone through the open door. What the moonlight touched wasn't much to look at: just an unfinished stairwell, walls with bits of insulation sticking out, and stains of black mold spattering the corners.

G: See? Nothing to steal, so no alarms.

R: Well, I'm still worried about that homeless maniac.

G: In my experience, the maniacs you have to worry about are the ones with homes.

R: (drily) In your expert experience.

G: In my expert experience. Come on, I've got something cool to show you.

A stairwell lead down into the basement, and cold air gushed up out of it to pool around your ankles.

R: Oh, that is sketchy.

G: Relax.

She punched me in the arm.

G: You watch too many movies. Got a phone?

R: Yeah.

G: Here, use it as a flashlight.

Flip phones were already out of date by then, but I didn't exactly come from money, so I was still using one. It didn't have a flashlight, so I opened it and used the light from the screen to see the steps as I went down. She went down before me: obviously, she'd made the trip before.

G: Watch the fifth step.

A second later, my foot plunged through its rotted fibers.

G: Told you so.

Once we were in the basement, small windows near the ceiling made it easier to see again. Pale streams of moonlight washed across the unpaved floor.

G: They never got around to pouring the concrete. But check this out.

She walked up to a rough patch in the floor, and I came up next to her. A drainage problem had washed a lot of the dirt away at some point, and a raccoon or a skunk or something had been digging. I crouched down and shone my phone around to get a better look.

R: It's a half-buried plank. What's this fiber attached to it?

Something about the plank struck me as off, but I didn't grasp what it was until I brushed some of the dirt away.

It wasn't the edge of a plank in the dirt, it was a shank of bone. I dropped my phone into the pit, and it bounced onto one side. In the watery glow of the screen, I saw that the fibers attached to it were a piece of cloth, and that the cloth bore a print.

Flowers, like the girl's dress.

When I looked up, I was alone in the basement of that house.

(Musical cue)

We never found out who the girl was, or who killed her. Things like that, I guess, just go by the wayside, because there's nothing to go on, and nobody pushing for it to get solved.

What can you do, except try and go on with your life?

But what gets to me though, is that after all that, after the police, and the forensics, and the media circus that followed, the house is still standing there, with its white walls and its dark windows. And after all that, every day, people forget that it's still there, even when they're walking down the cold side of the street.