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Our House

I put tulips under all the pillows, and then set fire to the house. As the flames thrash around, crawling their way through each room, I sit on the front lawn, watching my perfect little house morph into ash. Before it's forever ruined, I try to imagine each room, to preserve it in some way. I start with the bedroom. It was of moderate size, containing few items besides my queen-size bed, an old wooden dresser that my parents had passed on to me, and a closet that contained whatever clothes I couldn't fit in the dresser. The bedsheets used to be pure white, but once she moved in they became red, against my better wishes. Its floor was carpeted, much like the living room downstairs, providing a comfortable enough space to lay down if I was feeling particularly tired. I'd do that pretty often, especially when she wasn't home. Gazing up at the ceiling, pure white like the sheets that used to cover the bed. The white always brought me a certain calm, affording me an escape from the harsh red, finally allowing me the mental space to think. I wanted to experience that same therapeutic feeling one last time, but at that point I'd already poured the gasoline onto the carpet, causing it to swell and darken.

The bed was my main focus though, ensuring every inch of it was soaked so those horrid red sheets could never be resurrected. The only other addition I made to the now tainted bed were two pink tulips that stuck out from underneath the pillows. I knew she hated them. She made sure that whenever I got them for her, she'd put me down in the same dirt from which they came, but I didn't care. It was a small act of defiance that really didn't matter compared to the theater production I was now orchestrating. Each flame was now following the carefully constructed choreography that I had set within each room. So far the performance was more than I could've ever hoped for, each flame improvising and adapting to the scene around them. Despite the more than satisfying show, I felt a drop run down my illuminated face.

The living room is next. It was directly to the right when you walked in the door, with the same carpet as the bedroom upstairs, but it never felt quite as well suited for the therapeutic floor sessions that I'd have in the bedroom. The living room provided its own special comforts, however. A decently sized TV was mounted on the wall, allowing me to watch whatever show or movie I was in the mood for. I'd often rewatch the same stuff, though. It brought me a certain relief despite the obvious, predictable nature. The only thing to disturb this repetitious comfort was her condescending gaze telling me how pathetic and worthless I was. I'd experience both the repetitious viewings and judgmental gazes from the leather couch that I'd found at a yard sale. It wasn't anything special, but it had that homey brown leather look you think of when you first think of a basic leather couch. When I first brought it into the house, I thought about how perfectly it was placed in the middle of the room, how it was always meant to be there. It had traveled unknown miles and lived in an undetermined number of homes in order to finally arrive here, in my perfect little house, in my perfect little living room. To her though, it was an eyesore.

"Why do we even keep that ugly ass thing?" she'd say, with that same, unforgiving gaze that would deplete my confidence.

"Because I like it?"

"Heh." She'd brush the comment off her shoulder, trying to sound like she's joking, hiding the true resentment she's feeling. "And you think that's a good enough reason?"

I had stared at the couch for a while. It gazed back at me, questioning the reason for my sudden, malicious decision to destroy it and the home which it had inhabited for years now. I didn't give it an answer. I simply poured the gasoline, allowing it to seep into the couch like loose change. I had wanted to drag it outside, at least give myself a better viewing experience for what was about to happen, but also to salvage at least one thing of mine that had inhabited the house that wasn't my own body. For this to mean anything, though, it had to burn with the rest of the house. At least it's fair that way. Everything that was hers is mine and everything that was mine is hers. Now, we are both left with nothing.

I did have something, though. Not the couch; I could never say that was really mine considering how often she plopped herself on it, taking up most of the space, and leaving me barely enough space to sit. No, it was my mug. It was a large, white mug with a slight chip on its rim from when I dropped it in the sink while doing dishes. I remember being terrified that I'd broken it completely, that I couldn't utilize the last thing I truly owned within that house ever again. But it had endured my error in physical coordination, and I continued to use it every morning and every night. Every time I held it in my hand, I could feel myself loosening up. The calming weight of it in my hand let me know that I still had one thing left for my own. But then one

morning, this morning, I went downstairs to claim it again, as I had done every morning before. She was standing there with it in her hands, sipping her morning coffee from it while watching the television in the other room. Her red lipstick stained the white ceramic. It might as well be shattered into a million pieces.

“What?” She asked, finally noticing my gaze.

“Nothing, just thinking about what I want for breakfast.” I hid my contempt. I hid my rage; it’s the only thing I can claim as my own anymore.

Stop. Stop thinking about what you’ve lost. It’s been lost for years now. The second she entered your life and the house in which that life was cultivated, it was no longer yours. You built it from scratch. You chopped the wood. You built it using the materials mother nature provided. You wanted something to call your own. To truly claim it as your own. The couch, the bed, the dresser, hell, even the carpet. All of them made an image. My image. My home. But with her there, how could it be mine anymore? It became *ours*. It’s hard to even say that it was ours since she came to reject everything that was mine, and I rejected everything that was hers. That places the house itself and everything within it in a constant state of possessive limbo, with no one able to claim anything as his or her own since the other will end up rejecting it regardless. And since one person rejects it, that means we both reject it, since it’s supposed to be *our* house. At the end of the day, it ends up belonging to no one.

So burning down this house, a house that was once so beautiful and holistic in its vision, was a mercy. It was sick, infected by a vision that was not my own. I let her in. I shared myself with her. Shared my home. She didn’t want any part of it. She just wanted the ideal. The perfect husband who’d conform to her decorative wills. I wanted my house back.

I hear tires squeak to a halt behind me. I shouldn’t have stayed. I should’ve left as soon as I knew the house was going to thoroughly burn, but I needed to be here to see the look on her face. I turn around to see her stepping out of her car. It’s dark out, so it’s hard to make out her face in the blinding headlights. My mind begins to run through all of the different possibilities: Shock, hatred, anger, devastation. I don’t want to face any of them but I know I have to. When the headlights shut off, everything goes dark for a moment until I finally see her face. She’s looking directly at me, her figure outlined by the flame in front of us. It’s that same look of resigned disappointment she always had whenever I walked through the door. We hold our gaze for a while. There’s nothing left to say. Nothing to do to fix what we’ve done to each other. Eventually, she walks over to me, sits on the grass, and watches the show I’ve orchestrated for us. “What happened?” There’s no inquiry in her voice, only blunt force.

“I burned the house down.” I know that’s not what she meant, but it’s the only answer I care to give at the moment.

“You know that’s not what I meant.” She’s utilizing that same, blunt tone to deliver her response.

“You know what happened, so can we please stop treating each other like children?”

Her face remains still. Not twitching or reacting to what I’ve said in any way. It’s as blank as the ceiling, only instead of bringing me comfort, it brings me the same dread as those red sheets. She seems to be focusing on something in particular. Her eyes seem transfixed on a certain point in the house. She’s unnaturally calm as if she’s finally seeing what we were, what we are. On her face, I project a future. One in which we don’t fight over what we own. One in which we don’t try to control each other.

We’ll have kids—three of them. Two boys and a girl. I try to think of what we’ll name them, probably something common like Claire or Benjamin. Maybe we’d even name one of them after our grandparents or something like that. But their names aren’t really what I’m trying to focus on at the moment. I’m just focusing on the idea of them, of our family. When the sun is covered in dark, looming clouds, we’ll all gather on that homey brown couch to watch a movie together. A new one this time, since everyone’s craving something a little exciting and different. And when the sun returns, shining through onto the grass below our feet, we’ll go into the backyard to play catch or some variation of tag. Hell, maybe we’ll even have a dog to play with, just to add an extra layer to our perfect family. Then after an exhausting day of caring for our kids, our house, we’ll take the kids to their bedrooms, put them to bed. One of us will read them a story, while the other watches in pure adoration. It’s a nice idea, having a family. Most importantly though, it would be our family.

But it was never going to happen. We’re not those parents, those people. We never had the capability for such mutual love and possession. All we had were our own selfish desires. We were only just now accepting that about each other. And all it took was for me to burn the house down.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t make you happy,” she says, eyes glistening.

It’s the first time in a while she’s been sincere with me, providing a small reminder of why I fell for her in the first place. “Yeah, me too,” I say.