

A House in Canyon

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The town of Canyon, Calif., although only a few miles from the city of Oakland, is known to only a few outsiders. In the first place, it is hardly a town at all, consisting of only two public buildings — a post office and an elementary school — and no businesses. In the second place, there is only one way to get to it, namely, by a long, winding asphalt road that descends from Skyline Blvd. in the hills above Oakland, through heavily wooded land that is owned, and jealously guarded against development, by the Municipal Water Dept., which has a reservoir a few miles away. The region is still primitive enough to require signs warning the motorist to be on the lookout for deer, which can often be seen bounding through the trees by the side of the road, or, sometimes, merely staring with wide eyes at the intrusion of a car into their quiet world.

Understandably, the town's obscurity once made it an ideal home for artists and intellectuals, but now, only a few of its seventy or so scattered houses are occupied by painters or writers. The truth is, not even the residents could tell you who lives in Canyon — nor would they if they could.

One of those painters, now a vigorous eighty-year-old, has gathered around him a circle of artists, ex-hippies, teachers, and intellectuals. This circle, of which I am proud to be a member, gets together ever month or so for an afternoon of walking in the woods, followed by a good dinner with plenty of Zinfandel home-made by the old man and his son.

What I am about to describe happened on one of those afternoon walks.

It was a spring afternoon, the trees already rich with green following the late winter rains. Seven or eight of us, including my friend Emily, a poet, Egan, the painter's son, and his wife, Kimberly, had decided to explore an unused dirt road about half a mile from the old man's house. As so often happens in our get-togethers, the subject of the town of Canyon came up. I asked Egan if anyone knows who exactly lives there.

He laughed. "Probably not. Some guy —" He turned to his wife, "What was his name, darlin'?" — some guy came up here a few years ago and tried to write a book on Canyon, but —" and he laughed again, "no one would talk to him! I don't think my father knows who lives here now, other than a few neighbors, and he's been here since the Forties."

The road narrowed to a path which followed the bottom of a ravine up a steep ridge. We stopped for a brief rest. I looked up and noticed a house at the top of one side of the ravine — well, not a house: a shack. The exterior was part unpainted boards nailed diagonally across the studs, part tar-paper, part shingles which had once been painted white, the whole raised a couple of feet off the ground on cinder blocks. The place couldn't have contained more than two rooms.

"Egan," I said, "Who lives there?"

"I don't know. Some woman I think. What's her name, babe? Lisa or Lily or something like that."

My friend Emily and I have a game which we sometimes play on our walks: if we find a particularly interesting looking house — say one in the North Berkeley Hills, or around the Claremont Hotel in South Berkeley, or in Piedmont — and we are in a playful mood, we imagine what the inhabitants of the house are like — try to describe them, imagine what they do for a living, whom they hate, whom they love. In this case, however, we didn't have a beautiful house but a shack in the middle of nowhere. Yet I knew we were both thinking the same thing.

"Hey, folks," I said, "you go on ahead. We're going to see if we can talk to her."

In any other town Egan would have eagerly joined us, but I know he felt embarrassed. It is not the kind of thing that residents or former residents do in a town so obsessed with privacy.

"OK," he said, with an encouraging laugh. "We'll wait for you."

We walked up the dirt driveway. It was overgrown like the path, long branches hung over it which we had to hold aside in order to pass. I wondered why the occupant of the house didn't cut

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these back, especially as the driveway seemed to be the only means by which she could bring in groceries and supplies. Maybe there were steps on the other side of the ridge.

We reached the top. We couldn't help marvelling at the crude construction: many nails not driven in all the way, the boards cut unevenly, some of the tar-paper hanging loose. The windows were dark, apparently covered over with black paper or cloth on the inside. Underneath the house were old boards, paint cans, a few things — what, we couldn't tell — covered with dirty sheets of black plastic. We walked around to the right-hand side, where there was a door opening onto a wooden landing made of fresh wood, the steps from the landing going down toward the front of the house. Steps and landing had a railing made of two-by-fours. All around the house was a kind of dark green ground cover, out of which sprouted various flowers on long thin stems perhaps two feet or so in height. I couldn't recall ever having seen anything like them, but then, unlike Emily, I am notoriously ignorant of botany. Narrow dirt paths wandered through the cover.

We stood below the porch. "Excuse me!" I called out. "Is anybody here? Hello?"

No reply. I tried again. "Hello? Is anybody here?" There was a movement behind the door, a sound of a lock being snapped back, and then the door opened barely half way. Fingers held the edge of the door. We saw the face of a woman perhaps in her thirties.

"We're awfully sorry, but we saw your house from below." I pointed to the ravine. "We just couldn't resist trying to find out who lives here. This is my friend, Emily Hall."

The woman gave a barely perceptible nod toward Emily.

"I'm John Franklin," I said. Again an almost imperceptible nod.

Then she said, without emotion, "What did you want?"

"Well, we just wanted to know who lives here. We're awfully sorry to bother you. But this is such an intriguing house." Seeing no response, I tried to make us less a pair of strangers to her.

"We don't live in Canyon, but we have friends who do. We were just out for a walk. We love it here. But we're not planning to move here, don't worry!"

"Uh-hunh."

In a tone of what I hoped she would perceive as playful curiosity, I asked, "Are you an artist by any chance?"

She shook her head.

"A writer?"

"No."

"An architect?" I was afraid that Emily would burst out laughing, considering the house.

"No."

"We're sorry for intruding," I repeated. Then, after a pause, "Did you build the house yourself?"

"Some of it."

"It must be wonderful to live here. Among all these trees."

She nodded.

"We'll leave if you want us to."

And now, for the first time, she actually spoke to us. "No, that's all right."

"Our friends are the son and daughter-in-law of Nathaniel —, you know, the old painter who lives down near the road. Do you know them?"

Now we were back to non-committal nods. "I've seen them."

"Do you commute to work from here?"

She shook her head.

"You stay here all day, then." And even as I was saying it, I knew it made us sound like poten-

tial intruders or worse.

No reaction. By this time, Emily, I think because she had become embarrassed at my questions, was wandering down one of the paths. Then I heard her exclaim, “Oh, how wonderful!”

She was stooping over one of the tall-stemmed flowers, this one with little purple and red petals. “Oh, you have —” and she mentioned the scientific name. “They’re so rare! I didn’t even know they grew in the United States. Did you plant them?”

“Yes,” said the woman, in a tone that suggested she was both shy about revealing so much of herself and irritated at having to provide an answer which to her was so obvious.

Emily continued to make her way along the path, peering at the strange multi-colored flowers. “And you also have — Oh, how wonderful!”

And then, suddenly, almost eerily, the voice of this strange person behind the door, changed. “Would you like to come in?”

Emily straightened up, gave me a quick look conveying both uneasiness and delight. I waited for her, then we went up the steps, which, although they were made of fresh wood, seemed to slope to the left in a way that made you lose your balance. The woman held the door open for us, we stepped inside. She was tall, I guessed about 5’9”. She was attractive, though the paleness of her skin bothered me. She wore no lipstick. Her shoulder-length black hair was drawn back and held with a silver clasp. She wore a white muslin blouse which loosely concealed her full breasts. Her black skirt had a peculiar, slightly wrinkled quality. She wore low black slipper-like shoes. I thought: she looks like a violinist — why did I forget to ask her if she was a musician? — or the mildly eccentric daughter of some wealthy old family in Berkeley who, a little later than usual, was a Ph.D. candidate in English literature or art history.

We were standing in a kind of hallway which seemed to be a converted front porch; a single window ran the length of the front wall, providing a view of the woods below. The floor was made of crude boards, caked with dirt, like those of a potting shed or a nursery, and the the place had a hot-house smell of crowded greenery.

“You can come this way,” she said, turning and walking down the little hallway. At the end was a doorway leading into a dark room. We watched her disappear inside and looked at each other, reluctant to follow. But our curiosity was now irresistible, and we stepped warily into the dark — in fact, to our eyes, after the green glare — pitch-black, room. As my eyes adjusted, I could make out the woman sitting on what appeared to be a couch. I was struck by how demurely she sat, hands folded on her knees, knees pressed together. At one end of the couch, near the doorway, I could make out a fireplace.

Behind the couch there seemed to be a lamp and a cluster of dry branches, presumably meant to be decorative. Two low stuffed chairs faced the couch.

Normally when I enter a person’s living room, I automatically say something like “This is very nice!” but I couldn’t bring myself to do it — at the least because she must know we could hardly see a thing.

There was a long pause. Then Emily broke the silence: “It must get lonely up here!”

I thought: why doesn’t the woman offer us something to drink?

“Oh, you get used to it.”

“Are you a horticulturist?”, Emily asked.

For the first time, the woman smiled.

Emily continued, with a warm, though respectful, tone, “You must be connected with the University.”

“Not exactly. Well, sometimes.”

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I was dying to know if she had a lover. She was certainly good-looking enough. Christ, what a spooky place to live!

“Is that a plant over there?” Emily asked, pointing through the gloom at something at the far end of the couch.

“I’d love to see it,” Emily continued. “It’s a little dark in here. I guess our eyes haven’t adjusted yet.”

“No,” said the woman in response to Emily’s request, “that wouldn’t be appropriate.”

Hell, I thought, she’s nothing but an unpleasant eccentric. I was getting bored. I put my hands on my knees, got up. Suddenly I became aware of something near my cheek. I’m sure I must have jumped, made some sort of sound. In the light coming from the door, I could see what looked like, at least in silhouette, the leaves and twigs of a young sapling. I had stood up into the branches. The tree must have been planted in a pot, but I couldn’t believe I had failed to notice it when we entered the room.

The woman was still seated on the couch, hands folded. She was saying something to Emily.

“Dear?” I said to Emily, not hesitating to interrupt. “This is so...” I couldn’t help starting to laugh.

She made an exclamation as she turned toward me. I assumed it was because of the tree, but then I saw that she herself was sitting underneath a small tree. For some reason it came to my mind that the dimly perceived leaves were maple leaves — we had had a maple tree in our yard when I was a child: Emily reminded me of the way a kid will hide under the branches of a small tree.

“Excuse me,” I said to the woman, “but how did you...? Where did these...? Excuse me, but these trees weren’t here a few minutes ago. How did they get there?” And I couldn’t avoid the impression that the leaves and twigs surrounding my head had grown thicker since I first noticed them. I attempted to sit down, but the foliage now seemed to be just as thick below as it was above.

“Dear, I think we should go,” I said. Emily pushed the twigs aside and began to get up. “We’re sorry,” I said to the woman, “but I think it’s getting late. We thank you for your hospitality. We can find our way out.” We made our way to the door. Emily went first. I looked back once more inside the darkness, could just make out the whiteness of the woman’s blouse. We hastened down the little hallway amid the blaze of green through the window. I pushed the door open, we quickly descended the leaning steps, followed the little path to the driveway.

“What the fuck was all that?” I said. “Holy Christ!”

“There must have been someone else there,” she said. “There must have been.”

“They looked like ordinary trees, didn’t they?” I said.

“I remember thinking that it was growing darker as I was talking to her, but I didn’t think to look up,” said Emily. “Oh, who *is* she? We’ll have to ask Egan.”

“He didn’t even know her name,” I reminded her.

“Let’s get him to visit her,” said Emily with a nervous laugh, and she turned back toward the house, I assumed for a last look at the place.

“Oh, my God, *look!*”

The woman was standing on the railing of the landing at the top of the steps, arms spread, in a crouch that made me think of a young, awkward girl about to leap off a barn into a haystack, or, of an Acapulco diver about to leap off one of his cliffs into the blue water a hundred feet below. She straightened her legs, *pushed off* from the railing, and we both gasped in anticipation of her fall, but she did not fall, she simply glided slowly through the air some six feet above her garden, her

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legs now bent back, skirt flapping slowly in the breeze of her movement. We saw her eyes, which were looking down at us in a wide, staring, mad trance. And the message in them, repeated over and over, we felt go buzzing up and down our spines:

“Look at my flowers! Look at my flowers! Look at my plants and trees!”