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May 1, 1997

Final - Signs

Every day we drove by the huge black sign. “Welcome to Huber Heights,” it said, in average-sized plain letters. Then, in giant letters below it added the flourish “The Largest Community of Brick Homes.” Charles Huber was proud of his city. If I wanted to see the last line of words, I would have to strain against the seat belt to see the bottom of the sign out of the car window; yet each time we passed it, I struggled to read the whole sign. I used to feel the same pride that the sign displayed.

“Are brick houses better than regular ones, Mom?” I asked her once.

“They’re better because you don’t have to paint them every year,” was the only answer I received. But I loved our new house when I was six years old and we moved into it from a tiny rental across town-our temporary camp while my mom and father looked for something more permanent. There were four bedrooms upstairs, so my younger brother and I each had our own room and used the fourth as our playroom. We had a climbing tree in our front yard, a giant sugar maple that reflected brilliant red and yellow in the fall and carpeted the lawn with its oversized leaves. I thought we had found our paradise.

By Halloween, there were enough leaves in the yard that my brother and I could rake them into neat little rows and make mazes out of them. We tried to play tag in our maze, but it was too easy to step across the little mounds and we spent most of the time arguing about who cheated to tag whom.

Why are Grandma and Grandpa taking us trick-or-treating? They never have before. I know I'm not too little to go past the end of our block, but Jon is. We're three blocks away now. And why was Dad yelling at Mom? They should be out with us, walking us just to each house, not all the way to the door like Grandma and Grandpa do. I don't even want candy right now, either. I just want to go home. I'm scared...

I don't remember my father ever living in that house. I know he was there for a while because he put up the basketball hoop that we found in the green-carpeted study when we bought the house, though we were too small then to throw the ball high enough to reach the basket. Sometimes I think I even remember him kissing her on the cheek before or after work, though now it seems a ridiculous scene. I tried to find the seam where he was cut from our lives, but the memory is smoothed over and faded, the tattered parts left in the heavy grey trash cans that I dragged arduously to the curb on Wednesday mornings.

"Mom, what's wrong with Father? Why did he throw his TV and his video camera and his VCR in our trash? Those things are expensive aren't they? Why didn't he just sell them to somebody if he didn't want them?"

"Your father's very sick, boys."

"Can't they make him better? I want to see him again!"

"You might not see him again, for a long time. He's very, very sick..."

We visited my father in the hospital once. Later I found out that he was there because he couldn't fall asleep for four days straight. I remember that it felt more like a hotel than a hospital. There was a chandelier in the front entrance, elegant carpeting, and a reception desk, like a Hilton I have stayed in. My brother and I played pool on the table near his room for most of our visit, but we were still little and stood on the edges of the table to hit the hard cue ball like we did in little league tee-ball. I almost broke the cue stick out of frustration because I couldn't understand, but as soon as we left I wanted to go back and play it some more. I still feel guilty that that was the only reason I ever wanted to go back there. My mom walked the two of us quickly down the covered sidewalk to her car and I watched the dimly lit sign pass as we left. "Dartmouth Center for Mental Health," it read.

"You're a idiot, Jamey. Why do you call your daddy 'Father'?"

"Just 'cause, Chad. Besides, I'm much smarter than you because my dad is smart and I inherent it from him."

I have always called my dad father. I know I didn't pick it up from watching British television shows because my mom never let me watch TV when I was a kid. I think it is because she always refers to him as "your father", not "Dad", or "your dad". He was "your father" when my brother and I sat in the bathtub and she tried to explain to us why he wasn't living with us anymore, though all I could think of was a horror story I heard about a man who opened fire on a classroom of elementary school students then turned the gun on himself. In my nightmares it was him, sometimes with a large assault

rifle, sometimes with only a tiny silver pistol. I think I saw the story on the news, the time when my mom took us to a motel with strange yellow carpeting, and we stayed there alone for a week with a blue cooler full of food. That was the only time she ever made us watch television, while she went to her job at the co-op drug store. We were supposed to be safe from “your father” there, she said.

The big green sign above the pavement approached slowly at first, then rushed by as we pulled off of the freeway onto the exit ramp. “Indian Ripple Road, exit 1 mile,” it always said. That meant the long car ride to my father’s new apartment was almost over. Thirty-five minutes used to be such a long drive for my brother and me. We pulled up in front of one of the two-story red brick buildings-each with its wall of glass dividing it down the center and the solitary brown metal door in the middle. The hardware-store metal numbers tacked to the door slanted sharply down to the right. “4, 4, 3, 4...” Inside, we were met by the dim light from a chandelier like the frosted colored glass lamps hanging over pool tables in smoky bars. The blue carpet reeked of cheap cleaning chemicals.

The first wooden door on the right opened to darkness. My father flipped on the light switch on the brick wall inside the door, illuminating the brown carpet and the beige walls on the far side of the room with the yellow incandescent light from a solitary floor lamp. The sliding double glass doors remained permanently hidden behind the curtains. “I feel like I’m living in a fishbowl with those open,” he argued later. It seemed like he

never wanted to be seen.

“What do you boys want for dinner tonight?”

“Caviar.”

“Well you can order it while you wait-there’s still twenty-five minutes of news left.”

“Why do you always have to watch the news? News is stupid. It always has the same stuff on it.”

“Maybe when you get older, you’ll understand...”

So we called Pizza Hut like we did every other Friday when we got to his apartment at 6:35, and sat impatiently on the floor waiting for the TV and our dinner. We had organized the entire apartment around the tiny 14” sitting on the speckled white bar on the near side of the kitchen. The living room couch took it’s place against the wall directly in front of the TV, the round dining room table had all its chairs on one side of it (not that we ever really used it, anyway), and our video games fit perfectly into the empty space left when we took them back to our mom’s house at the end of every weekend. After a our short exercise in patience, my father went to bed, leaving us to a weekend of vegetation.

When our dinner doorbell rang, we would have to shake him awake. Sometimes he would go to the door himself to pay, taking a slice or two before heading back to his silent bedroom, but most times he would just roll over to give us the wallet from the back pocket of his jeans and slip back to sleep. My brother sat on the couch with the pizza

between us and a giant roll of paper towels to keep the video game controls from getting greasy. We drank all six cans of soda ourselves, to keep us awake as late as possible battling whatever monsters in whatever game we had rented that weekend. We had to finish it before the weekend was over.

Five o'clock on Sundays was my least favorite time of the week. Looking over the piles of dirty, crumpled paper towels and the open pizza boxes, it would finally register that I had spent the entire weekend sitting in front of the TV screen. In less than an hour our mom would arrive to pick us up with our two-night bed hair, and we would race to clean the piles off the floor and gather our clothes and video games to take back to our mom's house. One Sunday she brought us baked potatoes from Wendy's and the four of us sat at his unused round wooden table while he signed some papers for her. It was almost natural.

I remember the last time I saw the Huber Heights sign. I watched it pass by between the boxes piled high in the back seat of my mom's car-the last load of our belongings left in the house on Mandrake Drive. They were taking down the thin metal "For Sale" sign as we pulled out of the driveway. I was still mad to leave our big house for our tiny new one with almost no backyard, but that was when backyards and playrooms were the things that were most important. It didn't matter to me that there were now only three of us living in the four-bedroom house.

“You guys don’t want to have to stay after school at extended day anymore, do you? This house is only fifteen minutes from the school - you can take the RTA home.”

“Why can’t we ride the school bus like we used to?”

“It’s too expensive, and I can’t pick you up after school anymore. Besides it’s closer to your father’s apartment, too.”

My brother and I had to get up early to catch the regional transit bus on time. It did not wait outside our door when we still had oatmeal to finish, and it wouldn’t take us directly to school, either. So there we stood at 7:23 AM on the far side of the four-lane boulevard under the blue sign on the light post. “17 - Semi-Express to Dayton Mall.” It wasn’t even supposed to stop for us, but the driver knew the handful of Miami Valley School kids that took this bus every morning to the stop on Mad River Road, three-tenths of a mile from school. And the afternoon driver knew the same kids who waited under the sagging trees at the corner by the fire hydrant, trampling the grass and leaving their cigarette butts on someone’s lawn.

We still returned to an empty house. We lay on the big white foam couches and watched TV until 5:51, then we rushed to vacuum the cold wood floors, take out the trash, and clean the catboxes before she got home. Sometimes we’d finish in time, sometimes we wouldn’t, but she was usually too tired from work then to care. We weren’t fooling anyone; she knew we watched the “tube” all afternoon.

She never had to hire babysitters anymore when she went out at night. She knew the second she left, we would run down to the basement to play our video games until we heard through the white plaster walls the concrete slabs shifting in the driveway under the

weight of the new Mazda that she bargained for a thousand dollars less than the owner really wanted to sell it for. I didn't know what she did at night, but I was glad that she never came home with anyone anymore. In Huber Heights she had a boyfriend named Jim who wore gold chain that he said he said his parents had put around his neck when he was born. He worked at a Coors distribution center near the freeway, and always brought free cases to my mom. At first I didn't mind him until he tied my ankle through the handle of an old mattress we had sitting in the hall by our kitchen, then when my mom tried to get rid of him, he pretended to be sick and kept me awake at night ringing an annoying little bell from my mom's bedroom every time he needed something. She slept on the couch.

“Why do we have to go again! I hate Dr. Bob's office. It's too small and I've read the Calvin and Hobbes book a million times already and I get sick whenever we go on the freeway in your car.”

“Don't argue with me young man, just get in the car. I'm not going to ask you again.”

Dr. Bob had a beard and looked like he belonged in Yellow Springs, a hippie college town near Glen Helen Reserve. His office was on the top floor of the tallest building on Main Street, just half a mile from the orange rocks where “Yellow Springs” flowed. “Yellow Springs Psychiatric”, said the letters etched into the wooden sign hanging above the sidewalk. We climbed the narrow stairway to the second floor and sat down in the folding chairs next to the outdated radio tuner that wouldn't have picked up any radio stations nearby anyway. I had read “The Essential Calvin and Hobbes” first last

time, so I had to read the little Garfield books until Jon was done. On one visit we had to go into one of the rooms with our mom, but instead of Dr. Bob, a tall, strange-looking woman named Aïda with a deep voice was waiting for us. She made us do strange things. My brother and I hit each other with the soft foam Bataka bats, we played a board game with my mom that I had never seen before, and she asked us questions about our father while we sat in a row of chairs. At least the time went faster that way.

One night my mom took us to a “meeting”; at the end we waded through the milling crowds, she introduced us to a tall balding man with a red beard and hair. He smiled and reached down to shake our hands, but he seemed nervous and gripped our hands tightly, like grown-ups do.

“This is Bill...”

“Hi, Bill.”

“Hello, boys.”

Things slowly changed at my mother’s house. Our second summer there, we rented a trailer to move the stuff from Bill’s apartment into our already small cramped house. There wasn’t really that much, but it was still extra. Soon there were new rules, and more chores. The house had to be clean by the time either one of them got home. The TV was hidden during the day. Our allowance was cut and we were forced to get paper routes. The fights began.

“This isn’t your house! Do you pay to live here? You can go live with your father if you don’t like our rules.”

“You can’t throw me out of the house! I will call the cops on you I swear!”

“Go ahead. I have every right to this.”

“Fuck you, Bill!!!”

“Asshole!!”

I was thirteen when I sat barefoot in front of the Pet Mart under the street lamps and watched the cars race by with my fists clenched underneath my armpits. I wasn’t even a block from my mother’s house, but I wasn’t really trying to run away. I didn’t feel quite as unwanted outside the closed pet store. It wasn’t the first time I heard the idea of living with my father. I had thought about it as I delivered the flyers for the lawnmowing service that my mom made me start, or rode home with my friends’ parents because I was “too old” to spend the night anymore. But it usually took me the two weeks after we stayed with my father to get back to a normal sleeping pattern, and I didn’t think my life would improve even if I could go live with him. We asked him about it once, but he didn’t seem too enthusiastic and we knew better than to push him. When he moved to Chillicothe, two hours away from our friends and our lives, we had no way out.

“How’s your mother doing these days?”

“Hmmmph.”

“...she likes to be in control, doesn’t she?”

“It’s horrible. You should see the chain she has Bill on. Then he has to take it out

on us. Shit travels downhill...

"...mmm...it seems to me that you would do better if you just did what they asked...then you would be free to do what you really want to do...Mead told me that I would have to go back to Chillicothe...Now, I could have fought with them about it, but it was easier just to go along with it...the boss thinks that I am a team player, now, so I have some freedom in the lab to do what I really want to do...if I had made an issue of it, they would be watching me more closely and I wouldn't be able to get away with as much..."

"Yeah, right. There's no way in hell I can put up with Mom and Bill's shit. And even if I could, I seriously doubt that they would give me any more freedom."

"...I have been thinking..."

"Uh oh,"

"...in physics, life is particularly observer-specific...Schrödinger would describe reality as a thin plane tapering off into nothingness...Now...for a particular observer, the plane spikes near the observer...this would be the locus of experience that the observer has, well, observed..."

"Umm..."

"...for any particular observer, the world changes in relation to the particular observer's locus, and as the plane tapers, the universe ceases to maintain itself..."

"Uh, thanks, but..."

Two hours was not so long of a drive every other weekend. When it was warm, we would stop in Jamestown for giant ice cream cones. We usually spent the first hour

complaining about everything that Mom and Bill had done since the last visit, then my father would give us his latest perspective on life. I always thought it was strange that he had so many new theories about life when he barely lived one himself, but he also had a lot of time to himself to think about the life that he had already lived.

It was a cold November when we moved again. As we grew older, the houses got smaller. We hired a moving company to move the furniture the two miles to our new house. I had to take the bus just a little farther, but I got a carpeted room and a pool table in the basement. I was used to moving, each time I traded for a few extra frills.

“...my parents, my pink walls, my guitar, my piano, my best friend Debs-I love Debbie...”

“...my cats...”

“...ugh, I hate cats. Oh, my stuffed animals...my job at The Gap...my brother, my house. I miss home so much...”

“My mom and my stepdad are making me pay rent to live in their house this summer.”

I sat waiting for the final math 293 prelin to be passed out. She was already looking forward to summer. I missed my cats a little, but my favorite cat I had to put sleep while I was at my mother's house for spring break. I didn't want to go back to my

mother's house; she and Bill were more concerned with helping me grow up than just loving me. My father was the only root I had in Chillicothe, and I couldn't afford to stay at school all summer. I have spent my whole life looking for a place to hang my sign. In bold, plain letters, it has only one word:

“HOME”