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Final - Signs (part 2)

Every day we drove by the huge black sign on the way home. “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 coming back anymore, though all I could think of was a horror story I 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.

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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 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 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. I thought it was because 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 its 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 home 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 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 on Sundays came to be my least favorite time of the week. Looking over the piles of dirty, crumpled paper towels and the open pizza boxes, I realized that I had spent the entire weekend standing in front of the TV screen. In less than an hour our mom would arrive to pick us up with our three-day bed hair, and we would race to clean the piles off the floor and gather our clothes and video games to take home. Home meant Sunday chores, cleaning the house for an hour, and struggling with the homework that we avoided doing all weekend. I always resented the way my mom brought us back into the real world.

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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 four-bedroom 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 only three of us living there.

But then there were four. I don't remember ever meeting Bill. Maybe it was at the end of some self-help meeting when we were reunited with my mom, or maybe we met him some day after school when my mom came to pick us up at the extended day care, but he slid seamlessly into my memory the same way my father disappeared from it into the swirling past.