

On the day I first discovered the house I had been feeling particularly off. I'm still not exactly sure why, but what I found that day hidden in the trees would have a lasting impact on me. It had been a few months since we had moved into our new neighborhood, a community with houses so close together that I could watch the neighbor's TV from my own home. The half-day at school should have made me happy, but I found that too much time on my own made me feel uneasy. Despite having spent my morning at school I still felt a strange sense of loneliness, leaving me even more unsettled. It was not the first time I'd felt this loneliness before. Time spent alone often leaves me with the feeling, and I've made a point to fill my time with anything to try and avoid the chilling sensation. The irony of it is that I'm not a lonely person at all. Since I was young I've had a solid group of friends, and we often spend our free time in each other's company. Even so, the feeling didn't subside. Without a reason to sit alone with my own thoughts, I went out to find something more. I made my way to the edge of a wooded area, a single dirt road dividing it from the association. Although I had seen this particular stretch of forest in passing, I had never had a reason to go further, but the thought of going back home and waiting for something to happen was far less appealing than whatever was drawing me into the woods.

There was a clear path that was visible from the road, so I continued on. As soon as I entered the woods I felt some sort of relief from the restlessness of the day. Fallen leaves carpeted the ground below me, and the early November air felt sharp and cool. With every breath I took, I was more overwhelmed by the aroma of the forest around me. The smell of decaying leaves and fresh rain. Further in, the path looped around and reconnected to itself. It was disappointing. It felt like there had to be something more. As I turned to leave I noticed a small stone shed. The structure itself was fairly unimpressive but it felt like I had found some

sort of treasure. I wondered why it was there, seemingly solitary among the trees. Then as if it had appeared out of nowhere I saw the house.

Off the beaten path, hidden from the view of the road sat a crumbling two-story house. I was frozen where I stood taking in as much of the scene as I could. The front of the house looked like it had once had a wall full of large windows that must have shattered and fallen out. The entryway had collapsed completely leaving the front door hanging above a gaping hole. Above the door, was an attic that was also missing a wall leaving it open to face the elements. My curiosity got the best of me. I approached the windowsill, the easiest entrance to the main floor and carefully ducked inside.

I found myself in what I could only imagine was a living room. The floors were covered in broken glass from the windows and had been scattered with various random objects. I picked up a framed canvas on the floor and tried to make out what it had once shown, but it was far too faded by the sun to tell. I wondered then, where it had hung on the walls. I looked up at the peeling wallpaper, yellow, covered in tiny flowers, and tried to imagine what the living room had once looked like. A strange mix of sadness and longing overcame me as I pictured a family sitting with each other talking about their days. *What were they like?* I wondered to myself.

I continued through an empty doorway into the next room. There I saw the staircase up to the top floor. My mind began to wander again as I tried to think about the people who had gone up and down those stairs. When was the last time someone came downstairs? Did they know it would be their last time? I tried to remember the last time I walked down the stairs of my childhood home and realized that I couldn't recall. I shook the thought from my mind and began to climb the shockingly sturdy stairs, hyper-aware of every step I took. The top floor was in terrible condition. Half of it had collapsed to the floor below making it a treacherous journey to my next room, what I would come to call the attic. It was hard to know what the room had been before, but it was by far the most interesting. The floor was covered in layers of old newspapers, magazines, junk mail, and holiday cards all dating back to the 1950s through 1970s. Years

worth of mail strewn around an empty room. I picked up an old birthday card and tried to make out the faint faded cursive to no avail. I pictured my own bedroom, birthday cards stored away in shoeboxes in the corners, and wondered how these cards were simply tossed about and left behind.

I wandered back down the stairs to the final few rooms. It all felt so quiet. That's when it occurred to me that I hadn't seen any graffiti, no empty beer cans, nothing except what had been left behind in the final days, and I tried to think of how it happened. How the house came to be frozen in time, how seemingly no one had even touched it since. I left the woods feeling confused that day. I wasn't sure what I was looking for, but what I found gave me even more questions than answers. How could something so beautiful and once full of life be left behind to rot for decades? How could something once loved just be forgotten? Do the places we inhabit still hold our memories in the years after we are gone, and how long will it take for us to be forgotten completely? I think the hardest part is that I am just as confused now as I was that day, and I need to accept the idea that I may never find the answers I'm looking for.

For days afterward I would think about the house, and in the months following I would visit over and over. Sometimes I would sit on its stone porch and read, others I would just sit in the attic looking out at the woods below. I sat with the memories of those who lived before, crafted in my own mind as a way to immortalize them. Each time I went, I felt that strange sad nostalgia for this house that wasn't even mine and the nameless ghosts of its previous inhabitants. The loneliness from before was replaced by a much more complicated array of emotions. Maybe it was because it made me think about my own time here, or the places that I had been connected to over the years, but one thing I know for certain is that starting from that moment in the woods, something about that house had changed me.