

The Yellow House

There was a slight chance that we were going to be late. But not if my mother could help it.

“Alan, get out of the bed. Now.”

I’m awake now. My mother’s voice is harsh and loud, interrupting my sleep. I have to drag myself out of the bed, force myself to leave the heat of my blankets. My house shoes are alongside the bed, just the way I’d left them last night, in that perfect spot where I could swing my legs out of bed and right into their well-worn soles. The air is always cold in the morning, that time of day before my father turns the heat on. It’s Sunday morning and we are going to church, the way we always do and have done since I’ve been able to remember. My routine is the same. Brush teeth, wash face, take shower, button shirt, zip up pants, put on tie, tie shoes, brush dull brown hair, fix smile on my face. Now I am ready. I walk down the stairs slowly, avoiding the seventh stair from the top that squeaks when you step on it. The kitchen is empty. My mother has disappeared to some other part of the house. She’s probably standing in front of the mirror now, fixing her dull brown hair and touching up the faint makeup on her small sober face.

“Morning.”

Rachel is awake and dressed, walking into the kitchen in that smug way of hers. I turn around so I don’t have to look at her and open the door to the refrigerator. I don’t talk to younger sisters; younger sisters who go out of their way to succeed where I’ve failed. There is nothing in the refrigerator to eat. I should clarify; nothing in the refrigerator that I want to eat.

“Mom said to hurry up. You don’t have time for breakfast.”

I’m ignoring her but I take the hint. I close the refrigerator and grab the cereal box out of the pantry, eating it dry out of the box. I don’t have time for milk and I don’t like milk on my cereal anyway, makes it too soggy too fast.

I can hear my mother moving around upstairs. Clip. Clop. Her steps are uneven, always landing heavily on the leg that is roughly one inch shorter than her other. I haven’t seen my father yet. He’s always invisible on Sunday mornings. I don’t know when he wakes up or where he gets dressed, but he’s always ready and waiting for us outside, warming up the car. I can

hear my mother making her way downstairs now. She never avoids the seventh stair from the top, the one that squeaks.

“Alan. Rachel. It’s time to go.”

The drive is the same; flat fields, sometimes white from the snow, right now a tired brown, glistening from frost that hasn’t melted yet in the sparse sunlight. It takes about fifteen minutes to drive into town from our farm. I pass the time by looking out of the window. The flat empty fields are moving past at exactly forty mph, the speed limit along Old Mill Road. My father never speeds, steering the car with care. Concentrating. The ride is silent. My mother is staring straight ahead. I can only see the side of her face. I can’t tell what she’s thinking. Rachel is fiddling with a small mirror, checking to see that every blonde strand is in its proper place, gathered at the base of her head in a tortoise shell clip. I think about telling on her then, about how I saw her flirting and smiling with Bobby Sanders, her fingers playing with the collar of her shirt. The way she leaned towards him smiling and laughing at something he’d said, brushing her fingers across his arm once or twice.

“What are you looking at?”

I turn my head back to the window and the passing fields.

The church is larger than the number of people who actually attend it. When it had been built, they purposely made it large, hoping that its lofty ceilings and its sharp stained glass windows would make people want to come. It had worked for the first month. We’d seen record numbers of faces, some new and some old and recognizable that had gone missing weeks, months, and years ago. But we were back to our usual size, the people who attended every service and the people who attended most of the services. My family was one who attended every service; listening to Father Montgomery even though it seemed to me that he gave the same sermon every Sunday.

We’d arrived in time. My mother was talking to a few of her friends, women whose hair was never out of place and whose clothes were pious and pressed. My father was standing beside her, slightly behind her, along with the all the other husbands of these women who were so much like my mother. And I was standing beside my father, slightly behind him. I had nowhere else to go.

Rachel had disappeared as soon as we had walked in through the doors. I scanned over the people milling around, all of them separated into small groups, the quiet murmur of chaste conversations humming above the clunking of the struggling furnace. I could see the Worthingtons and the Harrisons in a group by themselves. The two wealthiest families in the town made it a point to stick together. Through their expensive but suitably subdued clothes I could just catch a glimpse of Rachel. She was standing with a group of other girls, not exactly in the middle of them but somehow managing to be, as she laughed and smiled, as she silently appraised their outfits and evaluated the way they wore their hair. She had an ease and a certainty about her that made me turn around and pay attention to what my mother was saying.

As Father Montgomery drifted to the front, we all scattered to our pews. None of them had our names on them but we all sat in the same ones every Sunday. The Worthingtons and the Harringtons’ pews were across the aisle from each other and near the front, close enough to be seen but far enough away so as not to feel as if Father Montgomery was speaking directly to them. Our pew was in the middle, several rows behind the Worthingtons and several rows in front of the unfortunate Elliots. They were poor. My mother said the people who were poor and the people who had something to feel guilty about sat in the back. She never said whether they were one and the same.

She is always late. Her shoes, ones my mother would wear, sound like stones on the polished wooden floor, intermittently drowning out the sound of Father Montgomery's voice. She makes an effort to be demure; her head is down as she makes her way down to the front row of pews, whispering "excuse me" as she steps over the people already sitting down. She slips out of her wool coat, the satin lining sliding easily over her shoulders. I can hear Father Montgomery's voice softly rolling on, something about us all loving one another. Her head is nodding, agreeing with what he's saying. Amen. But she doesn't fool me. I can sense her sins, like pheromones triggering the receptors in my brain.

I've heard her call herself Sarah. But I imagine that her real name sounds like music. Alexandra. Georgiana. Savannah. She'd just started attending our church about a month ago, arriving one day quiet and appropriately dressed. Her hair was smooth and pulled back, reserved, all except the color. It was a gentle red mixed with strands of startling warmth. Her skin was pale but alive. Her eyes a subtle brown. I'd looked at her with interest that day. Our numbers were small enough that we noticed any new person that showed up. She was years older than I was, looking like she was midway between twenty and thirty. No one knew where she had come from; she wasn't one of the people who lived in or near town but just never bothered to show up at church. No one had talked to her that day. They'd talked about her to one another.

"Where'd she come from?"

"I heard she was from St. Louis."

"Trying to live like honest folk. I know her kind."

Daniel Harlan said she lived over on the poor side of town, next to the abandoned old furniture factory and near the house, of what my mother called, 'ill repute.' I don't know how Daniel knew this information or whether it was even true. But I took him for his word. On the days when my mother was out, gone for a meeting of the fledgling Women's Garden Society and their afternoon tea and gossip, I would slip out of the house and ride my bicycle into town. Rachel was always in her room laughing as she talked on the phone or laughing over at one of her friend's house. She didn't notice or care what I did. And my father was always at work. It was a long ride along flat roads but it was worth it. I still wasn't sure what house she lived in. Daniel hadn't known the number or even the color. But I imagined that it was the yellow one with its paint chipping off in large flakes and its porch sagging under the weight of itself. The house reminded me of her, or of how I thought of her, the once bold yellow sides of the house faded to a modest butter. I never saw her enter the house. I never saw her leave it either.

I'd snuck into the old furniture factory on one of those days—when my mother and father and sister were gone—the broken and missing windows providing a perfect spot for sitting and watching. The yellow house had threadbare curtains hanging from the window. They were thin enough to see the faint outlines of furniture in the room and allowed me to see the soft outlines of bodies that moved around the room. Except I'd only seen the shadow of a person in the room one time. They had moved slowly, entering the room and turning on the lamp that I guessed was sitting on a table. It seemed to be a woman's figure. Her shadow was long and thin and slow. She'd sat down on a chair or a sofa and she didn't move for a long time. I imagined she knew I was there watching her. She stayed like that for hours, until the shadows lengthened and began to disappear, until I knew I had to go home.

The street was deserted as I slipped out of the window of the old factory and climbed on my bike. I took the long way home; past Old Man Davis' drug store, where I could just hear faint music drifting around the door and outside into the cool evening air. I could see the kids from my high school, the bright light inside the store illuminating them like window displays, as they laughed and horsed around with each other. I'd often watched them from the shadows of the

hardware store across the street. I only glance at them now and wonder whether Sarah likes milkshakes.

Father Montgomery is talking about the love a man has for a woman, how it is pure and clean like new undisturbed snow that lies like a blanket covering the ground and the trees. Sarah is not nodding. Her shoulders are slightly hunched as if protecting herself from a pain that haunts her. She doesn't agree with this. I don't either. Love is like the last dirty remains of snow. Hard and stubborn. But the thought of purity is beautiful. As I look at the way the reflection from the glass in the window warms Sarah's hair I imagine love could be like that. New and unblemished. I look at my father and my mother. They are staring straight ahead. My mother, hard and stubborn. My father, unaware and unreachable.

Sometimes I imagined her as fallen gentry. She'd run away to marry a poor passionate poet, someone that her family would never approve of, would never allow her to marry. He'd had hair that was deep brown and poetically long with a hint of curl. He'd had eyes that were sad and dark. She'd met him in a gloomy bookshop. He'd had on faded corduroy trousers and a worn wool sweater. It had been a meeting of kindred souls; a real romance, heady and sudden. He'd wanted to marry her but she'd said no. Her family would never allow them to. He'd asked her to run away with him and she'd refused. He'd told her that he was leaving, that he'd never come back. She couldn't bear to part with him so she'd pleaded with her unyielding parents to give their consent, they'd refused. She'd run away with him. They'd disowned her. He'd died a few months after they'd been together, the happiest and the saddest time of her life, and she'd ended up here; living in the aging house near the old furniture factory.

My eyes are drawn to Sarah...Savannah...Alexandra...Georgiana. I study the back of her head and the way her hair rests against the back of her neck. I study the slope of her shoulders. I feel something poke me in my side. Rachel is looking at me. Her eyes are hard and grey, warmed by flecks of honey that seem out of place. She knows that I haven't been paying attention to Father Montgomery, that I'd been far away from here. I turn my head so that I can't see Rachel and her mocking stare and disapproving mouth.

Rachel didn't like Sarah. Neither did my mother. My father didn't have an opinion. It had been an instant dislike, unfounded and real. I'd never seen Rachel talk to her but I could tell the way that she and her friends whispered when Sarah walked past in shoes like my mother would wear. We'd talked about Sarah at dinner, my mother and Rachel discussing her undoubtedly scandal filled past, my father daydreaming, and me fuming that they didn't know the real story. How she'd given up everything for a poet, a poet who had died.

"She's probably one of *those* kind of women," Rachel had said.

My mother had nodded her head in agreement and looked disapproving at the thought of such a woman as they imagined Sarah to be attending our church. She'd also looked suspiciously at Rachel, making sure that her daughter didn't know *exactly* what kind of woman they suspected Sarah was.

"Sarah is not one of those women, Rachel."

"How do you know?"

"I just know." I'd told them. And I did know.

The sermon has finished. She is the first one to leave. I can see her stepping past the people in her pew, her mouth forming the words "excuse me," an apologetic but unembarrassed smile on her face. She makes her way up the aisle, weaving around the bodies that are spilling out into the space between the pews. I turn my head to follow her. Her eyes are straight ahead and she is clutching her wool coat around her shoulders. I am not the only one whose eyes are following her. Daniel Harlan's eyes meet mine and he smiles as if we share a secret. He purses his lips as if to whistle, the kind you use when you appreciate what you saw.

The Harringtons and the Worthingtons are watching her too, Mrs. Harrington and Worthington with frowns on their faces, thin lips frozen in unforgiving lines, Mr. Worthington and Harrington with gleams in their eyes that make the tightness in my stomach unbearable. I'd seen Mr. Harrington one day from the broken window of the furniture factory. I recognized his 1953 Alpine White Cadillac Eldorado. He'd driven down the street slowly, taking his time. I watched as he pulled into the dirt driveway of the yellow house and got out of his car. He was wearing sunglasses. He looked to his left and to his right, his gaze settling on the window I was looking out of. I ducked down beneath the window ledge hoping that the early evening shadows hid me from his view. I'd lifted my head up over the ledge of the window just in time to see him climb the five steps up to the porch of the yellow house. I'd seen him walk inside. He hadn't needed to knock.

Moving past my mother and brushing past my father; giving impersonal smiles to people who look as if they may try to talk to me, I follow her. I want to see where she goes. She stops at the back of the church, near to where the Elliots are; the sinners and the suspected sinners, the poor. She is smiling at Mrs. Elliott, touching her arm in a kind and familiar way. And then she is moving on, heading towards the door. Somehow while we were inside listening to our Sunday sermon the sun has managed to fight its way through the clouds. The sunlight is bright when she opens the door. For a second it illuminates her and then she's gone. I've forgotten my coat but I follow her outside anyway. She is walking across the street, her hands in her pockets, her head down. I don't cross the street. I stand on the dead grass outside of our too large church. I watch her as she walks away, getting smaller and smaller until she turns a corner and disappears from view.

My mother is ready to go. My father is following behind her. They've come outside looking for me, managing to separate Rachel from the rest of the giggling girls and the posturing boys. The ride home is silent. Rachel is fiddling with her hair, releasing the clip that holds her hair in its place. It's long and straight and it reminds me of the faded yellow house where I imagine Sarah lives. She shakes her head from side to side. Her hair comes alive. I almost like Rachel when she is like this, unguarded and unaware.

"What are you looking at?"

I turn my head and look out the window. The fields are streaming past at exactly forty mph. They're just brown and dead now. The sun has melted the frost.